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33

from the life of Sri Anandamayi Ma

Bithika Mukerji

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From the Life
of

Sri Anandamayi Ma

Volume One

Bithika Mukerji

SHREE SHREE ANANDAMAYEE SANGHA
BHADAINI, VARANASI

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CONTENTS

Foreword		i
Preface		v
Acknowledgements		viii
Chapter One	... Childhood	1
Chapter Two	... With Ramani Mohan's Family	12
Chapter Three	... Bajitpur : The Līlā of Sādhanā	26
Chapter Four	... Dacca : Life at Shahbagh	39
Chapter Five	... Gathering of Devotees	52
Chapter Six	... The Atmosphere of the Miraculous	67
Chapter Seven	... Multifarious Ways of the Sādhaka	75
Chapter Eight	... Vāsantīpūjā at Siddheshwari	87
Chapter Nine	... Beginning of Ceaseless Wanderings	102
Chapter Ten	... The Kālī of Ramnā Ashram at Dacca	110
Chapter Eleven	... Mataji's First Journey Across Northern India	124
Chapter Twelve	... Farewell to Shahbagh	135
Chapter Thirteen	... The Developing Pattern of Future Life	146
Chapter Fourteen	... Mataji's Kheyāl to Leave Dacca	157
Chapter Fifteen	... Bholanath	167
Chapter Sixteen	... The Widening Circle	177
Chapter Seventeen	... The Last Year in Dacca	186
Chapter Eighteen	... Farewell to Dacca	196
Glossary		207

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FOREWORD

My first contact with Anandmayi Ma was more than a quarter of a century ago when she paid a visit to the School at Rajghat, Varanasi. There was a large crowd of devotees that had gathered in the large hall of the Children's School. When she was leaving I asked her if she had any message for us. The answer was characteristically swift and spontaneous : "Pitaji, you have chosen a very fine place for your work. Many saints have lived here in the past. But you know how Mother Earth produces sweet fruits as well as poisonous ones. You must be like that, Pitaji."

This cryptic remark left a deep and unforgettable impression on my mind. In any organizational work, is it possible not to judge, not to evaluate ? Right appraisal of performance is essential for efficiency. But it has to be completely free from praise or blame of the individual. To judge is to condemn those whom we judge.

Is it possible to transcend good and evil ? What is the state of mind that makes it possible to rise above this duality ? The apparently common saying, "There is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so," has far deeper implications than we realize. The function of the mind is to evaluate, to judge what is beneficial and what is destructive to the individual or to the group. It is an indispensable factor in the evolutionary process. There is, however, a stage reached by a few rare individuals where action is no longer dictated by thought or individual feeling. Ma calls this 'Kheyāl'. When the individual self or ego is silent, then the 'Universal' acts. The state of mind that is completely silent is the state of Love.

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It is in this condition that Ma continually and effortlessly lives.

Light is invisible, but makes all things visible. Its function is to reveal the structure and beauty of things. We do not know what Light is ; we can know its existence by its effects. Likewise Love is invisible. It can be known only by what it reveals to us—the beauty hidden in the heart of man.

People are amazed and ask, "How is it possible for Ma to love and understand thousands of her devotees ?" The Truth is simple. Normally we do not see each other as we really are ; the barrier of the separate self obscures our vision, and we create a world of our own, darkened by the shadow that the self casts upon every thought and feeling. Ma lives in a world where there is no darkness at all. One has only to stand in the radiance of her Love to realize that, though it is a mystery that baffles the mind of man, it is an intense reality. To be within her presence is to know that one is understood and forgiven. Love is everlasting forgiveness.

This seems to me to be the secret of her marvellous, but often unintelligible endeavours to respond to the needs of her numerous devotees. She undertakes apparently purposeless journeys, but when closely examined they are an answer to the call of some devotee who needs her presence. She lives only for the world ; she has few needs of her own, if any. In that state of mind she becomes the pure channel for the descent of grace. The process may be conscious or unconscious.

The study of such a life is fascinating, of absorbing interest not only to the devotee, but to the student of the psychology of spiritual genius. Mystics have often been the

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products of apparently unfavourable environments. What is the nature of the soil, the climate that produces goodness and love and the subtle wisdom that sweetly ordereth all things? Formal education, the development of the conceptual mind does not seem to be a necessary factor in the efflorescence of spiritual genius. There is an intelligence that has no relation to the logical intellectual mind, but which is able to pierce through error, and falsehood, and directly perceive Truth.

To relate any individual to our personal well-being is false love. Such personal love is the basis of all social and family traditions. True love comes into being, the moment we become aware of the falseness in our 'loving'.

The perception of Truth is not a function of the conceptual mind. Error creeps in when we view a fact or an event from a personal point of view. Party loyalty is the normal discipline of political life. But the moment we subordinate the welfare of the larger group to party interests, it introduces conflict and error in our life. Every happening or event has a place in the scheme of things. We can perceive its significance when we do not relate it to our personal benefit. The moment we are aware of this falseness in our thinking there is the perception of Truth.

The intelligence that is behind Love and Truth is essentially the same. It is the capacity to see things in the context of the whole. It is the wisdom of the spirit.

Ma has met many of the most subtle and learned intellects of the world. She tackles all problems with an effortless ease that is amazing, and people ask : "What are you ?

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Who are you ?" The answer is simple : "I am whatever you think me to be", a perfectly correct statement.

Dr. Bithika Mukerji's book is a record of Anandmayi Ma's early life which was spent mostly in Bengal. The narrative of events is largely derived from the diaries of her devotees. They are authentic descriptions of happenings. The interpretation of their significance demands extraordinary spiritual and psychological equipment. In fact Ma herself is the only person competent to evaluate such experiences.

The book is a valuable document recording the authentic experiences of devotees at different levels of intelligence, leaving the interpretations to psychologists of the future.

201, Habibullah Road,
Madras.

B Sanjiva Rao.

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PREFACE

Mataji or Sri Anandamayi Ma occupies an unique position in the contemporary cultural milieu of India. She has not inaugurated any new movement of thought or religion; she has no messages to give or missions to fulfil. Yet, she attracts to her people belonging to all faiths, coming from all walks of life and of all age groups. Her acceptance of people who come in quest of her has limitless dimensions. Very humane in her concerns, yet she is supremely unconcerned. Her uninvolvement is simultaneous with a zest in all kinds of human endeavour. No aspect of human concern is without interest for her.

Since no parallels of this unique blend of characteristics can be drawn, it is not possible to say what or who she is.

During the years 1924-32, Mataji attracted a lot of public attention as a young housewife, who was in a state of constant spiritual exaltation. She was variously understood by people according to their own degree of understanding. Some thought her to be a great *sādhikā*, living in a state of God-intoxication. True though it was, it did not seem to accord with her supremely normal behaviour, her participation, albeit in her own unique way, in all mundane matters requiring her attention. It may be said that she transformed and enriched trivialities into phenomena of beauty. Besides, it became obvious to the devotees very soon that there was no question of a life of *sādhanā* or spiritual endeavour as far as Mataji was concerned. So the various conceptions had to yield to a more comprehensive and deeper awareness of her true stature which comprised all that her devotees saw in her and also transcended it.

Mataji's extraordinary personality first gained public re-

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cognition in Dacca (East Pakistan) during the years 1924-32. The present account of her life seeks to fulfil a demand for information regarding these early years.

The sources of information for this book are mostly verbal accounts from people who knew her in Dacca or even earlier. Many of these early devotees and their families left Dacca before and after partition in 1947 and are now settled in Varanasi.

Mataji's parents came to Dacca frequently during the years 1924-32. From them the devotees of Dacca came to know about Mataji's childhood. Subsequently many of these people visited Mataji's birthplace, Kheora, and also Atpara, Bajitpur and other villages where she had spent her childhood. They heard from the local people about Mataji's way of life at these places.

Didi Gurupriya has done great service to the devotees of Mataji by maintaining a diary from the year 1925. Didi is quite incapable of exaggerations or sentimental outpourings. She is a very prosaic person (she would consider this a compliment) and her accounts of Mataji's life are factual to the last degree. She, however, was not always in a position to know the variety of Mataji's activities. Therefore, the diaries are incomplete sources of information, although they are valuable records of Mataji's general way of life.

The incidents narrated at great length in the course of the book are common knowledge of those who have been associated with the *Āshram*. Most of the persons referred to or their friends and relations are still alive. Many of the incidents, as for example, the death of Vinodini Devi, I have heard from Birendra Chandra Mukherjee, Didi's eldest brother. I have also heard these accounts from Sm. Hiranbala Ghosh, Brahmachari Kamalakantji, Jogeshdada, and others. It is needless to add that the incidents reported herein are as

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authentic and credible as any account can be related by intelligent educated people who can look at things with an open mind. However, it goes without saying that this account illuminating the multisided personality of Mataji, is a poor substitute for the living presence. I am acutely conscious of the imperfections of this work and wish it were much better written. It is a very inadequate account of the participation of an ever increasing number of people in a continuing scene of remarkable beauty, spontaneity and other-worldliness. I have tried to present facts without apology or advocacy. My hope is that out of these materials some future artist may fashion a work which will be worthier of the subject.

August, 1970 Bithika Mukerji

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I shall take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the help given me by Sri S. Dutt. I have no words to express my gratitude to Sri Anil Chandra Ganguly, who, by agreeing to see the book through the Press, shouldered the most wearisome burden of the whole enterprise.

I should like to express my appreciation of the great courtesy extended to us by Sri Baidyanath Dutt of The Eureka Printing Works Private Limited. His tolerance of our erratic method of working has been phenomenal. My thanks are also due to the General Secretary of the Sangha for his continued support and encouragement. I am indebted to Sri V. P. Tyagi for his faultless typing of my chaotic manuscripts.

To the memory of B. Sanjiva Rao, I can only pay my homage. I am glad that because of this book, I am now in possession of a series of letters which express the innermost thoughts and philosophy of one of the great savants of our times. He received the typescripts of the book at a time when he was full of thoughts of Mataji. He wrote to say, "I am very pleased to have lived in the memory of Ma", during what turned out to be the last days of his life. I only wish that the book were worthier of the Foreword.

Bithika Mukerji

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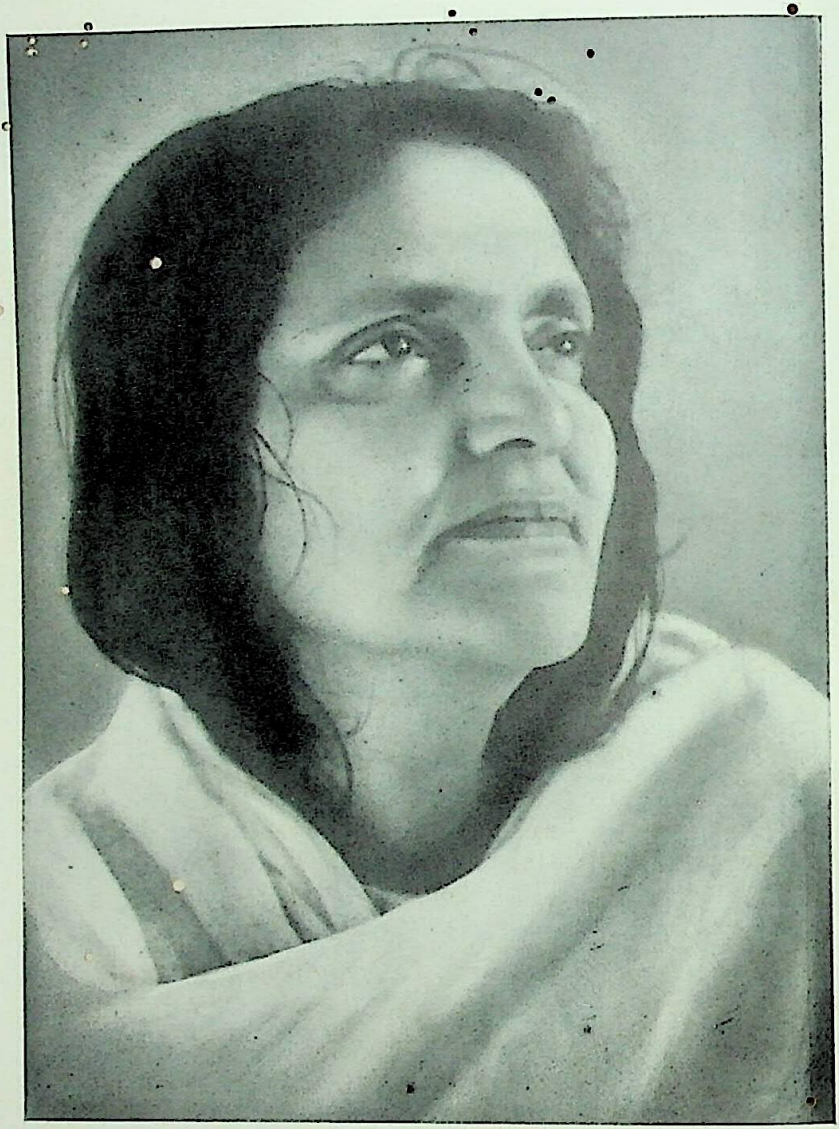

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Chapter One

CHILDHOOD : 1896-1909

In the heart of rural Bengal, in district Tripura, now in East Pakistan, there is a small village called Kheora. At the close of the last century, it was just a hamlet consisting mainly of thatched cottages. The villagers were mostly Muslims with a fair sprinkling of Hindus. Being far removed from the marketing centres it had remained a serene haven of peace where the noise and clamour of the rapidly changing world did not penetrate. The cottages nestled under groves of plantains and shady mango trees. Tall palms etched a picturesque skyline against the expanse of blue skies. As far as the eye could see, the undulating harmony of the surrounding green meadows was broken only by ponds, full of pink and white lotus flowers, and meandering waterways.

In one of the little cottages of this village lived Sri Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya with his wife Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi. The traditional *tulasī** in the courtyard of the neat and clean house indicated that it was the residence of a Hindu and the *Nārāyaṇa Śilā*† within the cottage, that it was the home of a devout Brahmin.

Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya, by all contemporary accounts, was an extra-ordinary man. He came of the distinguished *Kāśyapa* clan of Brahmins of Vidyakut, another village in

* A plant with very fragrant leaves, considered holy by all Hindus ; a variety of Basil.

† A special kind of small stone regarded by Hindus as an emblem of the Deity.

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the same district of Tripura. In his own village and in Kheora, where he had inherited the property of his maternal grand-father, he was highly respected and loved for his honest upright nature and his otherworldliness. Much of his time was taken up with the worship of *Nārāyaṇa*, the presiding deity of his family. His favourite occupation, however, was the singing of devotional songs. He was gifted with a fine musical voice. Sometimes his inspired singing seemed to establish rapport between himself and the Divine. The villagers would compare him with Ramprosad, the well-known saintly poet of Bengal who, it was believed, could invoke the presence of God by his devotional songs.

There was a strong streak of asceticism in his character which would not permit him to become absorbed in his family affairs. After the birth of his first child, a daughter, he brought his family to Kheora to stay with his mother. His restless spirit sought freedom from all ties. People were not very surprised when they heard that he had left home to become an ascetic and lead a life of renunciation. Unfortunately the child died very soon. The mute anguish in his young wife's face touched the hearts of neighbours and friends. They took it upon themselves to look for him. Eventually they sought him out in his place of retreat and with much difficulty persuaded him to return after an absence of nearly three years. Although he assumed the duties and responsibilities of a householder once more, a spirit of detachment was noticeable in his personality throughout his life. He would sometimes join the parties of wandering minstrels who occasionally visited the village, and accompany them on their peregrinations, singing *bhajanas** and *kīrtanas*†.

* Devotional songs.

† The names of the Lord strung together in the form of lyrics and set to music.

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His mother, very much concerned because of his way of life, went on a pilgrimage to a famous Kālī temple at Kasba, a town nearby, to pray for a grandson. But strangely, at the time of uttering the prayer, she found herself saying, "May a daughter be born to Bipin and his wife."

Bipin Bihari's wife Srimati Mokshada Sundari Devi was, and is to this day, one of those rare personalities who exemplify all the gentler human virtues. She is full of the wisdom which is the heritage of our village folk. The patience, dignity and fortitude with which she endured all the hardships of her life distinguish her from other women. She passed through the hard years and later, comparatively easier years of life, with unchanged calmness of spirit and dignity of behaviour. From the point of view of material needs, the family was quite poor. Nevertheless there was an abiding sense of contentment and sufficiency in the household. In spite of poverty she never knew what it was to be slovenly or bitter. Her meagre possessions were always in order, her cottage neat and clean and presentable. The most unexpected of guests was sure to find a warm welcome and, if nothing else, a few sugar puffs for his refreshment. She was, and still is, incapable of anger or even a harsh word.

Bipin Bihari was a musician. His wife had a poetic soul. In the privacy of her cottage, she composed many songs and lyrics, full of gentle wisdom and spiritual aspiration. Some of these lyrics have been set to music and are sung occasionally at religious meetings.

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On April 30, 1896 (19th *Vaiśākha* 1303 B.S.) a second child was born to this couple, a daughter, who is now known throughout India as Sri Ma Anandamayi or simply as Mataji.

Before, and immediately after, the birth of this child, Mokshada Sundari had frequent dreams of gods and goddesses. She dreamt that they were coming to her humble cottage, filling it with radiance and that she, overwhelmed by awe and wonder, was worshipping them. She still recalls that at the time of the birth of this child she hardly suffered any pain. Another unusual feature, remembered by the attending women, was that the new-born child could not be made to utter any sound. Their apprehension that there was something physically wrong with the baby, however, proved groundless. The infant began to thrive steadily and normally.

In due course, the Naming Ceremony took place. The happy couple, looking upon their daughter's tiny but perfect form, named her Nirmala Sundari† Devi.

Mokshada Devi, mindful of the death of her first-born, used to place her infant daughter every day under the *tulasī* plant to evoke God's blessings on her. As soon as little Nirmala was able to, she by herself went and performed this ritual under the holy plant, much to the relief of her hard-working mother, for whom it was difficult to spare a few moments necessary for this purpose.

This characteristic of patterning her behaviour according to the wishes of the people around her, became more evident

* The immaculate.

† The beautiful.

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to others as the child grew up. Her mother cannot recall that Nirmala ever expressed a wish or desire for anything for herself. But as soon as she was old enough, she started fetching and carrying eagerly not only for her mother but for her mother's friends also. Nirmala grew up to be a very happy and cheerful little girl. Her sunny disposition earned her many nicknames, such as, *Hāsi* (smiles) and *Khuśīr* (the happy one) *Mā*. She was a general favourite not only among her family but with the neighbours, Hindus as well as Muslims. She could always be counted upon to cook, look after young children or help the neighbours in their times of need. She was made welcome in every home. If any woman of the village happened to prepare a special delicacy she would keep a little of it apart for Nirmala. She endeared herself most naturally to her family, friends and neighbours.

Another prominent feature of the little girl's personality was her unquestioning acceptance of the biddings of elders. Many incidents are related to illustrate this characteristic of absolute obedience, which sometimes could become very disconcerting.

Once Nirmala was asked by her mother to go and wash an agate cup in the pond. Mokshada Devi saw that she was holding the cup a little negligently. Wishing to draw her daughter's attention to this, she said, "You may as well drop it". The next moment the cup lay shattered on the ground!

Once, as a child, Nirmala was taken to a fair by a relative, who put her down before a Śiva temple, enjoined the little girl to sit quietly until her return and moved away with her other companions. Unfortunately, the aunt, in enjoying the various attractions of the fair, forgot all about her charge and did not return for a long time. At last, suddenly

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reminded of the child, she in great trepidation hastened back, only to be reassured by the sight of Nirmala sitting like a little statue, motionless and staring into space. She had not moved an inch!

Bipin Bihari giving his little girl lessons in reading, had pointed out that she was to pause only when she came to a full-stop. If Nirmala came across a long sentence, she would twist and contort her little body in the effort to arrive at the full-stop in one breath. If she was forced to take a fresh breath in the middle of a sentence, she would start all over again. Such extreme obedience naturally annoyed her mother at times, but she could not scold her, as the child's good intentions were so obvious.

Nirmala's education was quite elementary. For a short while she was a pupil of the local school. But, since she helped her mother with the house work she could not attend school regularly. Three brothers were born after Nirmala, but they did not survive. Two sisters, Surabala and Hemalata, were born after the brothers and lastly a brother Makhan. Nirmala was extremely good with the children and they were very fond of her, but this meant that she did not have much time to devote to her studies. There were other difficulties too. The school was at some distance from her home. If Mokshada Devi was unable to find an escort for her, she had to remain at home. Her outfit for school consisted of a broken slate only. In spite of these obstacles, Nirmala always secured a good position in her class. After a visit by the Inspector of Schools, she, along with three other little girls, was chosen

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to be promoted to the Lower Primary School. The Inspector had found her as well prepared as some of the bright and regular students of her class.

This fact has been explained by Sri Anandamayi herself. Referring to this phase of her life, she laughingly said, "Somehow or other, I invariably happened to look up the very questions the teacher would ask, and consequently he always found me well prepared even after long absences. The meaning of unknown words would occur to me spontaneously. Supposing I came across the word '*hastī*', I would ponder for a while and it would occur to me that it meant 'elephant'. My parents hardly ever found time to help me with my lessons. So, actually my education is extremely rudimentary."

As far as religious practices are concerned, the instructions received by her were equally elementary. Her mother allowed her to help with the preparation for the daily worship of the *Nārāyaṇa Śilā* and her father taught her to sing devotional songs. His teachings were simple enough. He would say, "Come and sing with me. We shall sing the praises of Hari."

"Who is Hari?"

"The Lord of the Universe. He is very big and great. We are all His children".

"How big? As big as this meadow?"

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"Much bigger. We must worship Him and call down His mercy upon us. He is very kind, and takes care of us all. He has many names. Hari is one of them."

This sufficed for Nirmala and she became her father's regular and faithful companion whenever he engaged in this form of worship.

Nirmala's childhood was spent mostly in Kheora. She occasionally visited Sultanpur, which was her maternal uncle's village. There she had a number of cousins to play with. One of them, Sushila, relates that one day they had been out for a ramble in the fields. In the narrow village lane they came face to face with a herd of cows returning home from the pasture. The children ran off. From a distance they looked back and saw Nirmala standing very still in the middle of the lane surrounded by the cows. Some of them had lowered their heads and were rubbing them against her body and licking her gently. When the herd moved away, Nirmala ran to join her friends.

It has already been said that Nirmala was a child with a very happy disposition. But there were occasions when she would cry also. The three brothers who were born after her, died at the ages of seven and four, and one after six weeks only. While they were alive, Nirmala looked after them devotedly, missing school and play in order to take care of them. When they passed away, she not only accepted their loss without complaint, but never let her mother have the chance to indulge in her grief either. Whenever she saw her much-enduring mother mourn the death of her children, she broke out into such a torrent of heart-rending sobs that Mokshada Devi perforce had to forget her own sorrow in

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order to quieten the little girl. Mokshada Devi says that these were the only occasions on which Nirmala cried during her childhood.

Nirmala apparently had no desires of her own, so the incentives to her behaviour took shape out of the wishes of her companions. Perhaps this is how the following incident may be explained. There is an auspicious day during summer on which people abstain from cooked food and eat parched rice mixed with thickened milk and seasoned with ripe mangoes. One year, Mokshada Devi unable to afford mangoes had to prepare the meal for her children with milk only. She wistfully thought of all the other village children enjoying the much loved summer fruit. Suddenly Nirmala ran in from outside and gave her a large ripe mango. Mokshada Devi asked her sternly, "From where did you get this? You must go and return it at once!" Nirmala explained that she had found it lying in the field near the cottage as if someone had very carefully put it just there. The clean and unmarked skin of the mango bore out this statement. Mokshada Devi then felt obliged to accept and use it, because she knew that Nirmala was an exceptionally truthful child.

Nirmala grew up in peaceful surroundings as a happy and winsome little girl. Later her people came to understand that she was, even in the first years of her life, much more than just the simple docile and lovable child they had taken her to be. Incidents were recalled which admitted of a deeper significance than was realized at that time. Sri Anandamayi describes on occasions many events from this period of her

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life which show that she was a keen observer with a good deal of understanding and sense of humour far beyond her years. For example, she once related the following incident, "One night my father saw a snake curled round the rafters of our cottage. It was raining outside and, in the uncertain light of the oil-wick lamp, he did not like the idea of disturbing the reptile. Still less did he feel inclined to go to sleep, in view of the hazardous possibility of the snake dropping on us during the night. So he constructed some sort of a barricade with the beds and put us all behind it. Then, having made sure of us, he himself took refuge behind some other shelter. The thought occurred to me at that moment, that man was helpless indeed. He, who would protect us, could not protect himself, but needs must seek the protection of someone or something else."

She at times illustrates a point by saying, "People complain of distracting thoughts at the time of meditation, and these desires become more insistent than at other times. I tell them that even this is as it should be. When I was a child, I used to see my mother pour lime-water on the ground all around our cottage. This would bring all the earth worms creeping and crawling out of the ground. Then she would sweep them away and the surroundings would be clean and fresh for walking and playing. Meditation is like the lime-water. It brings out all the hidden uncleanliness inside you."

A few years ago, Sri Anandamayi was one day discussing with some women the different ways of cooking a particular vegetable. Mokshada Devi was also present. Sri Anandamayi said smilingly, "Do you know how mother used to cook for us? She would stop the mouth of the bottle of oil with her finger and then turn it upside down on the cooking pan.

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Have you ever heard of such a method of pouring out oil ?" Mokshada Devi joined in the general laughter and said good humouredly, "Well, I could not afford to waste even a drop of oil. Had it been your will, I dare say, you could have been born in different circumstances and been well provided for in your childhood". Mataji quickly responded, "No, no, I do not mean to say that we were ever in need of anything. We always had enough ; actually it is only when I grew up that I understood from what I heard people say that we had been poor. Mother was a very thrifty and careful housewife. We children were always well looked after."

At the time, however, Mokshada Devi had no idea that her daughter was anything more than a sweet and lovable child. As a matter of fact, she was a little afraid that the child was lacking in normal intelligence. Nirmala was subject to unaccountable fits of absent-mindedness. In the midst of work or play or at mealtimes, the little girl would become inert and with a fixed gaze stare into space. Mokshada Devi would shake and scold her or call her loudly by name as if calling her from a distance. It would be some time before the child could be brought back to the consciousness of her surroundings. Her mother, not unnaturally, thought that this could be a sign of a weak mind only. Nirmala was not at all naughty or mischievous like other children. This factor also gave rise to slight misgivings about her mental capacities, but everybody loved her for her sweet nature and radiant smiles.

Nirmala perhaps quite enjoyed the situation. Returning from the pond one day with a pitcher full of water balanced at her waist, she stood in front of her mother and said, "All of you say I am a simpleton. Am I not crooked now ?"

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Chapter Two

WITH RAMANI MOHAN'S FAMILY : 1909-1918

In accordance with the ancient custom of rural India, Nirmala's parents began to look for an eligible bridegroom for her even when she was a little more than a child. Friends and neighbours also took a hand in this. As everyone spoke well of the family of Sri Jagatbandhu Chakravarty of Atpara*, his third son was approved of as a suitable match for Nirmala.

Accordingly, on February 7, 1909 (25th *Māgha*, 1315 B.S), at the age of twelve years and ten months, Nirmala was married to Sri Ramani Mohan Chakravarty. In villages, the bride after the marriage ceremony either goes back to stay with her parents or lives with her husband's family as another daughter of the house till she attains maturity. In any case the bride is allowed to visit her own family very often as she may feel homesick, and it also gives her time to adjust herself to her new environment. Thus Nirmala remained with her parents for some time after her marriage. Ramani Mohan had been told that she was a student of the Lower Primary School. This encouraged him to write to her, which created a great sensation in the village. The arrival of a letter was a rare event in a village. Everybody came to know of it. Mokshada Devi propped up the letter in a prominent place so that her daughter could take it without embarrassment. But the letter remained where it was till Nirmala's friends persuaded and encouraged her to open and read it. Then, amidst much

* Atpara, district Dacca, Vikrampur, now in East Pakistan.

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laughing and teasing Nirmala and her friends sat down to compile an answer to it. This joint literary effort was painstakingly copied out by Nirmala and mailed.

After about a year or so, Bipin Bihari escorted his daughter to the house of Ramani Mohan's eldest brother Revati Mohan. Ramani Mohan's mother Srimati Tripura Sundari Devi had passed away before his marriage. So his eldest brother's wife Srimati Pramoda Devi had assumed the position and responsibilities of her mother-in-law. Nirmala stayed with this family for nearly four years. Before coming away Bipin Bihari drafted a few letters for her in suitable respectful language, which she could copy out in answer to Ramani Mohan's letters.

Ramani Mohan had two elder brothers, Revati Mohan and Surendra Mohan, and two younger ones, Kamini Kumar and Jamini Kumar. The youngest brother was a school-boy. Kamini Kumar had gone away from his village and they knew nothing about him except that he had been converted to Christianity and had become a clergyman. Ramani Mohan had five sisters.

Revati Mohan was working in the Railways as a Station Master. He used to be posted at various stations on the Dacca-Jagannathgunj line. At the time of his marriage Ramani Mohan was working in the Police department. About seven months later he lost his job and failed to secure another for some time. He then left his village home and went to Dacca to look for work. He occasionally visited Revati Mohan's family and sometimes brought simple presents for his wife. Recalling the early days of her marriage Sri Anandamayi says, "In the beginning my husband used to buy me one or two books. One night he asked me to read aloud to him while he settled himself down for rest. After I had read a few passages in my usual

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laboured style, he asked me to stop. Then turning over to the other side, he muttered to himself 'Lower Primary, indeed'.

After Nirmala went to live with her husband's family, Bipin Bihari and his wife, with their remaining three children. namely, two daughters Surabala and Hemalata, and one son Makhan, left Kheora and returned to their own village, Vidyakut.

Nirmala embarked on her new life with her husband's family. From the very beginning, she took upon herself the duties of her brother-in-law's entire household. Her work included fetching water from the pond, helping with the cooking, looking after the children and running errands for her somewhat exacting sister-in-law. Those who have seen Sri Anandamayi work in the house have all testified to the quickness and neatness of her movements. She seemed to get a lot of things accomplished within the least possible time. Her obedient and gentle nature pleased her husband's family very much. Indeed they thought that the young bride was a little stupid because such simplicity could only be unnatural. It was the custom in a conservative household for a young married woman to cover her head and face with her *śāri* before strangers and senior members of the family. Nirmala had been instructed to do this at the time of her marriage by the elders of both families. When her face was covered her movements became very restricted because she could see a small bit of ground at her feet only. Further, because Nirmala was quite incapable of peeping from under the veil, she would not understand such injunctions as "Bring it here". She would have to be told in words what was to be brought and where. This uncompromising obedience exasperated her new family at first, but the exasperation turned to indulgence as soon as they realized that Nirmala was absolutely consistent and sincere in her obedient attitude towards her elders.

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Revati Mohan's children became very attached to Nirmala. The eldest daughter Labanya was inseparable from her aunt. The child told her one day, "I feel like calling you mother and not aunt. Shall I do so?" Her mother, overhearing this, scolded her daughter for this absurdity. Labanya's brother, Ashu, was also very fond of his *Kākimā* (aunt). One day Nirmala was getting him ready for school. All of a sudden he started creating a fuss saying that he would not accept food from his *Kākimā's* (aunt) hands anymore. As his mother knew that he liked nothing better, she came to investigate and found that Nirmala's hands were in a deplorable condition. Continuous washing and scrubbing had corroded the skin and there were wounds round the bases of her fingers. Everyone was appalled and demanded to know why she had not said anything about it. As a matter of fact, Nirmala's tranquil deportment had prevented them from gauging the amount of work she had been doing. She had never appeared tired or overstrained, and in any case nobody could understand that a person could be in physical pain and not complain about it. Nirmala now accepted the treatment for her hands just as naturally as she had accepted the slow eating away of the flesh by unremitting hard work.

In spite of the heavy household routine, Nirmala found time to learn various arts and crafts. During her short hour of leisure in the afternoon, when the men were out at work, she would visit the houses of neighbours. Her sweet disposition made her welcome in every home. Although she was shy and retiring as befitted a newly married girl, she had a friendly and pleasant smile for other young women of her age. During these enjoyable sojourns in neighbouring houses, amidst friendly talks, Nirmala learnt needlework, canework, the spinning of fine threads, and other handicrafts. She displayed a keen interest in anything new and was quick to learn. She could spin thread

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so fine that she was able to put a whole length of the sacred thread (about 18 yards) inside the empty shell of a cardamom. She used to present such threads, packed in this manner, to various members of her family.

One of Ramani Mohan's sisters, who later came to be known as Matori *Pisimā* (aunt Matori), came to stay with them for some time. She was about the same age as Nirmala and the two girls became very friendly. Matori *Pisimā* was a very jolly person with twinkling eyes, full of humour. She would suggest all sorts of mischief, as for example, sampling the preserves and pickles while their sister-in-law was enjoying her siesta in the afternoon. Even this harmless prank was quite foreign to Nirmala's nature. Being the taller of the two, she brought the jars and bottles down for her friend, yet she herself never ate from them.

It has been written above that Nirmala was subject to spells of absent-mindedness in her childhood. Now also sometimes in the midst of work, she would unaccountably become inert as if sleeping. Once or twice, Pramoda was attracted to the kitchen by the smell of burning food. She found her young sister-in-law lying motionless on the kitchen-floor amidst the litter of cooking utensils. When shaken and aroused, she would appear to be embarrassed at the damage caused, and quickly set about repairing it. Pramoda thought that she had been overcome by sleep and left it at that.

Revati Mohan and his wife came to love Nirmala as their own daughter. A few years ago, Sri Anandamayi went to Calcutta to grace with her presence a big function organised by the devotees of the town. Pramoda Devi, a very old lady at that time, came to visit her sister-in-law. But circumstances were changed beyond her imagination. It may be surmised

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that Pramoda must have felt bewildered and lost amidst the great concourse of devotees. Sri Anandamayi had a very crowded programme, and was almost always unapproachable.

One night after the visitors had all departed and the Ashram settled down to rest, Sri Anandamayi quietly came out of her room. As it was long after midnight, a few close companions only were awake. Followed by them, she came to the bedside of her sister-in-law and very gently woke her up. Sitting close beside her she clasped her hands and gaily started conversing with her in the village dialect. She forthwith plunged into a sea of reminiscences, talking of old friends, familiar places, and reminding her of old stories and incidents. Although, taken a little aback at first, Pramoda quickly regained confidence and looked happy. She was particularly pleased to see how well Sri Anandamayi remembered the old days. She seemed to be able to recognize in the august personality of these days, the well-beloved girl who had served her so faithfully in the past. The hilarious laughter had woken up all those who were sleeping nearby, and the room was now crowded with women. Everyone had joined in the conversation and Sri Anandamayi was making them all laugh by her funny stories of village life. Sri Anandamayi turned to her sister-in-law and said laughingly, "Look, all these housewives think that they are great experts in household work. Tell them whether I too did not look after your house satisfactorily?" Pramoda considered the question for a while and then quite seriously told the ladies, "You cannot imagine how sweet and good she was. She not only did my entire work, but I will acknowledge that she did not give me any cause for dissatisfaction throughout the years that she was with me. Truly, that spirit of service (*sevā-bhāva*) is rare nowadays."

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To a few of the onlookers, what appeared to be more wonderful than this ungrudging testimonial was Sri Anandamayi's look of absolute gratification. Modest as she is, she appeared to be very pleased to have her services recognised and appreciated.

In 1913, about four years after Nirmala's marriage, Revati Mohan fell ill in his place of posting. Ramani Mohan and the other brothers came to see him. Ramani Mohan brought medical help from Dacca, but Revati Mohan passed away plunging his family in grief. The widow, her sister-in-law Nirmala and the children came to live in Atpara, their village home. Nirmala was with them for about six months, while Ramani Mohan was away working in Ashtagram.

Nirmala had to look after the needs of the bereaved family and do the work of the entire household. Ramani Mohan's sisters were all married, and his brothers were working in different places. They had looked upon Revati Mohan as the head of the family. His death deprived them of a home where they could come and meet one another. Gradually they drifted apart and it was a long time before they were brought together again by their young sister-in-law, Nirmala Devi.

From Atpara Nirmala went to Vidyakut to stay with her parents for a while. She remained with them for about six months and then came to Ashtagram in 1914 to look after the household of Ramani Mohan.

Bidding a tearful farewell, Mokshada Devi gave her daughter the following instructions regarding future deportment:

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"Now you must look upon your husband as your guardian and obey and respect him, just as you did your own parents."

Nirmala followed this advice implicitly and completely, as was her wont with all instructions received from elders.

Later on Ramani Mohan became better known as Bholanath, a name given to him by Sri Anandamayi. It may be definitely stated that throughout the lifetime of Bholanath Mataji never did anything without his consent and permission. Regarding her marriage Sri Anandamayi has said, "They told me at the time of my marriage that I should respect and obey Bholanath. Consequently, I gave him the respect and obedience due to my father. Bholanath from the very beginning was just like a father to me. He had implicit faith in me and appeared to be convinced that whatever I might do, would be right."

Bholanath was a simple villager, not possessing anything beyond the usual and elementary knowledge of religious life, and the ways of *sādhanā*. At the time of his marriage, he naturally could not foresee the extra-ordinary events that would radically change the tenor of his life. Yet he was not found wanting when confronted with the unusual consequences of this marriage.

It was he who first bore the impact of the revelation of Sri Anandamayi's unique personality. It was Bholanath who was privileged to witness the wonderful *kriyās* of *sādhanā* at Bajitpur and it was he who threw wide open his doors to the world, in spite of Sri Anandamayi's warning that he was engendering something which would get out of his control very soon.

Bholanath, although self-willed and proud, was also an

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extra-ordinarily kind-hearted and generous man. Childlike in his sudden flares of temper, he could easily be mollified.

Among Sri Anandamayi's close companions, he occupied the most anomalous position. On the one hand he looked upon her as his *Guru* and spiritual preceptor, and on the other, he received from her the untiring and selfless service of a devoted and dutiful wife. How he reconciled these two positions we do not know. He did not appear to suffer or feel any misgivings. His self-confidence and zest for life could not but affect all who came in contact with him. Sri Anandamayi's other close companions looked upon him as their guide and well-wisher and as the head of the small group of devotees.

The members of Bholanath's family, however, were not very easily reconciled to Nirmala's way of life. With the gradual unfolding of Nirmala's personality, it became clear to them that, it would never be possible for Bholanath to lead a conventional home-life with her. Although, Nirmala had endeared herself to her husband's family, they naturally had his interests at heart. Consequently, they thought it their duty to urge Bholanath to separate from his wife and marry again. Those who have known Bholanath, will readily understand that he could not have given any serious thoughts to this suggestion. So, it may be said that the question of leading a conventional married life just did not arise for this couple. When the time came for them to make their home together, the young husband found a spiritual aura round his wife which precluded all worldly thoughts from his mind. He accepted her as he found her gentle, obliging and hardworking but without a trace of worldly feeling or desire. Sri Anandamayi herself has said, "In the beginning he used to say, 'You are very young and childlike—it will be all right when you grow up'—but it seems I never grew up !"

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At Ashtagram Bholanath was the tenant of Jai Shankar Sen whose wife readily took upon herself the duty of looking after the comforts of the new household. Charmed by Nirmala's bright and happy demeanour, Srimati Sen named her *Khuśīr Mā*, which had been one of her pet-names in her childhood.

Nirmala Devi was about 18 years old at this time. She was a little taller than average and very slim. She had a very fair complexion and striking features. Her long black tresses reached almost to her knees. Her hands and feet were exceptionally small and delicately formed. Her whole personality radiated a joyousness which commanded the attention of all. Attired in a red *śārī*, she was one day going to visit a neighbour's house when one of Bholanath's friends, Kshetra Mohan, was so awed by her appearance that he spontaneously prostrated himself in front of her in obeisance, exclaiming, 'Devī Durgā.'*

Nirmala's young friends at Ashtagram called her '*Rāngā Didi*' (beautiful sister). Srimati Sen has said, "When *Khuśīr Mā* came to the pond, the *ghāts*† would be lit up by her radiant beauty."

At this time Hara Kumar Rai was staying with his sister Srimati Sen. He was educated and well employed, but at times would be carried away by religious fervour, and during these spells it became impossible for him to work normally. Hara Kumar's mother had died in the room in which the young couple were staying. Either because of this or for some other reason best known to him, he at his very first encounter

* The Divine spouse of Siva who is described in the Scriptures as clothed in red garments.

† The banks of the village pond, where women forgathered for washing and cleaning and also for an exchange of news and lighthearted gossip.

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with Nirmala prostrated himself before her and addressed her as 'Mother'. He began to look for opportunities of being of service to her. This was difficult because Nirmala, as befitted a young married woman, did not speak to men who were not members of her family. He would, however, bring vegetables for her and worry if the firewood was damp. Somehow he would procure dry wood for her. As may be imagined, all these unsolicited attentions were not approved by the neighbours. However, Hara Kumar did not care and, defying custom, visited her every day to do *praṇāma** and also to ask for a little *prasāda*.† But Nirmala would not break tradition. With her *śārī* drawn well over her face, she would stand at a distance quiet and unresponsive. She could not prevent him from doing *praṇāma,* but she certainly would not give him *prasāda.* In despair, Hara Kumar appealed to Bholanath, saying, that his entreaties which left her unmoved, would have melted the heart of a statue. Bholanath, impressed by his sincerity, asked Nirmala to give him a little of the rice from her plate. Nirmala always obeyed her husband and so Hara Kumar's wish was fulfilled. He used to say, "Now it is only I who call you Mother. The day will come when the world will recognize you and call you Mother."

By common parlance Hara Kumar was considered to be an eccentric person. Had he been a fully responsible member of the society, his words would have made a greater impression on people. Evidently the time for publicity had not yet arrived, so Hara Kumar's prophecy was not appreciated. Hara Kumar played the role of pioneer in another field as well. He was instrumental

* There are various types of prostration. The common method is to kneel and then bend down on the ground with the head towards the Deity.

† A particle from the left over food partaken of by some respected person, as for example, the *Guru* or Spiritual Guide. Great importance is given to *prasāda* in Hindu Scriptures. It is no longer food but a direct medium of transference of power from the *Guru* to the disciple.

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in drawing attention to the ecstatic states *(bhāvāvasthā)* of her body which as yet had not been recognised. It came about quite naturally.

The inhabitants of Ashtagram had to contend with sudden cyclones. During one such onslaught Bholanath, with his wife, had to remove to a safer place. They returned home after some days. Bholanath undertook such repairs to his house as were necessary. During the cyclone, the cane-work matting used for various purposes around the house had been blown off. A few of these sheets laid on the ground nearby. When Nirmala removed these, she was interested to find the ground underneath free of the dreaded weed which was the bane of life of the people of Ashtagram. This quick-growing grass defied control and was forever encroaching upon cultivated land. Nirmala now collected all the discarded matting and spread it around her house. This worked beautifully. The neat and clean surroundings of her house acquired a distinction by contrast to other weed-choked houses. Looking at the clean courtyard with its presiding *tulasī* it occurred to Hara Kumar that a large number of people could assemble and perhaps listen to good devotional music.

He invited the well-known party of Gagan Rai to come and sing for them. Nirmala, along with all the other women of the neighbourhood, sat nearby to listen to the singing. After a while her body became still and inert like a statue. For a long time she neither answered to the calls of her friends nor responded to shaking. Nirmala was now a grown-up young woman. People could not pass off this condition of her body as sleep, as had been done by her husband's family earlier, neither as a fit of absent-mindedness, nor as a sign of a weak mind, as had been assumed by her own family during her childhood. They did not know what to make of it. After the *kīrtana,*

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however, Nirmala was again her normal, her cheerful self, and so all queries were stilled in their minds.

Afer a year and four months of her stay in Ashtagram, Nirmala fell ill for sometime. When she recovered from her illness, she went home to Vidyakut for rest.

Referring to her life at Vidyakut, Sri Anandamayi has said, "At that time there was not much household work to be done as my sisters were old enough to help mother. I had plenty of leisure which I spent calling on friends and neighbours, or just strolling around by myself. In the dark, I sometimes perceived a strange effulgence enveloping my body, and that light seemed to move about with me."

In her parents' village, Nirmala could dispense with her heavy veils and move about freely. Mokshada Devi relates that Hindus and Muslims alike loved to have Nirmala visit their homes and talk to them. Nirmala and her friends were great enthusiasts for the game played with *cowrie* shells. Bholanath had not liked this game and had asked her not to play. Now at Vidyakut, when other young girls played, she would not participate in their games. Her friends told her that her husband would not know anything about it if she played in Vidyakut only, but Nirmala smilingly declined.

An interesting incident took place at this time. One of Nirmala's young cousins, Annapurna, had recently been married. She was living with her parents in their village. This girl began to show signs of abnormality—she would fall into a

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trance-like state for hours together. The village people, awed by unusual phenomenon, would collect round her and watch over her reverently. During one of these states, Nirmala happened to be present. She went up to the girl and whispered into her ear. Thereupon Annapurna regained consciousness and was not overtaken by these strange fits again. Subsequently, she went away to her husband's village and led a happy married life.

The magic words which Nirmala had whispered into her ear were : "Don't be upset. You will receive a letter from your husband very soon." Sri Anandamayi humourously recalls that the village-folk thought that she had used some spiritual powers to cure the girl. She related this incident to show that ordinarily it was difficult to distinguish between a genuine *bhāva* and other apparently similar conditions of the body.

While Nirmala was at Vidyakut, Bholanath was transferred to a town called Bajitpur. For sometime he could not arrange to take her there, so she remained with her parents at Vidyakut. In the beginning of 1918, he found a house in Bajitpur. Now Nirmala was able to join him. From Vidyakut she first went to Atpara and from there to Bajitpur.

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Chapter Three

BAJITPUR : THE LILA OF SADHANA : 1918-1924

Bajitpur has acquired a special significance for the devotees of Sri Anandamayi as the place where she went through the various processes of intensive *sādhanā*. How this came about may be best related in her own words : "One day in Bajitpur I went to bathe in a pond near the house where we lived. While I was pouring water over my body, the *kheyāla* suddenly came to me, 'How would it be to play the role of a *sādhaka ?*' And so the *līlā* (play) began."

Our knowledge of Sri Anandamayi's play of *sādhanā* is based upon what little she herself has disclosed and on the testimony of Bholanath and a few others who were fortunate enough to witness those practices.

The change was very gradual. As before, Nirmala performed her household work with scrupulous care. Bholanath was a sociable person. He liked to invite people to his house. His wife was a good cook and took great pains to prepare imaginative meals for his guests. She also had a lively sense of humour. One of Bholanath's friends happened to mention in her hearing that he could eat everything but radish. Some days later he came to their house for dinner. After enjoying a hearty meal he was not a little staggered to discover that he had eaten nothing but radish from the beginning to the end of the meal, including the sweet dish !

Bholanath was working under Bhudeb Basu who was the

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Assistant Superintendent of the estate of the Nawab of Dacca at Bajitpur. His wife and children became very fond of Nirmala. Another family closely connected with them was that of Janaki Basu and his wife Usha Devi.

One day Bhudeb Basu arranged for *kīrtana* at his house. Nirmala was sitting in an inner room with one of the children who was ill. After sometime she felt that her body was entering into a *bhāva*. At her request Bhudeb's wife arranged to have her taken home, which was nearby. Bhudeb, on being informed that Nirmala had gone home because she felt 'affected' by the *kīrtana*, came to the conclusion that she suffered from some nervous disorder. His wife went to see Nirmala a few days later and advised her to exercise more control over herself and not to give way to nervous reactions. Nirmala smiled and kept quiet.

As related above, she had the *kheyāla* to perform *sādhanā*. She had never acquired proficiency in reading and had not learnt from religious books or Scriptures how *sādhanā* might be practised.

Thus Nirmala went about her *sādhanā* as she had seen her mother and grandmother and various other devout women perform their evening rituals. After the day's work was done, she would carefully clean and sweep her room and the surrounding area till not a speck of dust was visible anywhere. Then she would burn incense, and in the quiet of the evening the whole atmosphere would be impregnated with the pure fragrance of sandalwood. She would then seat herself in one corner of her room and orally repeat the names of the Lord. After a few minutes her limbs would adjust themselves to the postures of *padmāsana, siddhāsana* or some

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other *āsana**. Needless to say, Nirmala at that time did not know the names of those meditative poses. She merely watched her body assume these postures.

Other *yogic mudrās* and *kriyās*† manifested themselves on her body during this time of evening worship. Bholanath, resting on his bed after his meal, would sometimes lie awake and watch her spell-bound until late into the night; at other times, overcome with fatigue after the day's work, he would fall asleep while Nirmala sat absorbed in a world of her own. Some of these *kriyās* he recognized for what they were, but most of them in their variety were beyond his comprehension. It was apparent to him that these motions were gone through as if they were happening to her naturally.

Nirmala used to repeat the name of Hari for no other reason than that her father had taught her to do so. Bholanath, a devout *Śākta*, was a little perturbed by this. He asked her one day, "Why do you repeat the names of Hari? We are not *Vaiṣṇavas*, we are *Śāktas*." Nirmala said, "What shall I do then? Shall I repeat the names of Śiva?" Considerably relieved, Bholanath agreed that she might do so.

It was all the same to her. Besides, the *kriyās* which manifested themselves in her body, did not appear to be affected by this change.

Generally, these *kriyās* took place after nightfall, but there was no definite time for them, and they would occur during the day as well. The external stimulus of *Nāma-japa*‡

* Posture involving the manoeuvering of the entire body.
† Gestures of hands and fingers.
‡ Repetition of the name of the Lord.

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also was not always necessary to bring them about. Some of the neighbours happened to see a few of the *kriyās* through the chinks in the cane-work fence. The simple villagers were at a loss to account for such strange behaviour. Nirmala did not appear to be ill or abnormal but completely lost in a world of her own. Not having come across this phenomenon before, they thought that she had become possessed by evil spirits. Nirmala appeared a changed person even during the hours when she was not actually engaged in *sādhanā*. She seemed withdrawn and there was a far-away look on her face. The erstwhile popular young girl began to be shunned by her neighbours. Her companions and friends, puzzled and mystified, began to avoid her. Nirmala, on the other hand, welcomed this solitude. Now that she was left severely alone, she had more time to devote to her *sādhanā*.

Many came and suggested that Bholanath should take the help of *ojhās** to cure her of evil spirits. The educated among his friends advised him to consult doctors, as they were convinced that she was suffering from some unusual form of hysteria. Although loath to do either, Bholanath felt rather helpless in the face of strong adverse criticism as well as sincere friendly advice. Finally he called in one or two *ojhās*. But they could effect no cure. One of them was specially well-known for his powers to expel evil spirits. When he came, Nirmala was sitting in a corner, seemingly oblivious of her surroundings. The man pronounced his exorcisms, and then sat down to watch the effect of his performance. All of a sudden, uttering loud groans, he rolled over on the floor in a spasm, as if he was in great pain. Bholanath tried in vain to bring him round. Then, thoroughly

* Men who profess to drive away evil spirits.

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alarmed by the man's groans and writhings, he suddenly bethought himself to appeal to Nirmala. Accordingly, he implored her saying, "What has happened to this man? Do please, put him right again." Immediately the man regained his consciousness. When he had fully recovered, he prostrated himself before Nirmala, who had sat throughout with unchanged demeanour saying, "She is the *Devī*. It was foolish of me to have had the audacity to try my powers on her."

Sri Anandamayi's life is singularly devoid of any conspicuous use of supernatural powers. They are neither deliberately kept concealed nor are they displayed voluntarily. Perhaps the incident of the *ojhā* was necessary to put Bholanath's mind at rest and strengthen his belief and faith in her.

Ramani Mohan luckily had a friend in Dr. Mahendra Nandi who, in addition to being a good physician, was a wise and intelligent man of the world. After observing Nirmala for a few days, he said to Bholanath that she was in an exalted spiritual state and should on no account be exposed to the gaze of common people. Bholanath was only too glad to follow this advice.

Nirmala's friend Usha saw her regularly although she had to come surreptitiously because her mother-in-law did not approve of this friendship with a girl who was so strange in her behaviour. Once Usha's son was taken ill. She brought him secretly to Nirmala and was convinced that the child's recovery was due to the fact that Nirmala had touched him. She would say to her friend, "Do you know, although you are so much younger, I feel like calling you 'Mother'!"

Nirmala's demeanour underwent a perceptible change from

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the month of May 1922. She became more fully occupied with her *sādhanā*. Three months later on August 3, 1922 (the night of of *Rākhī Pūrṇimā*), Nirmala, all by herself, went through the process of spiritual initiation or *dīkṣā*.

Sri Anandamayi sometimes explains the significance of this spiritual initiation in these words, "You want to call somebody you can see, but you don't know his name; so you somehow or other try to attract his attention by beckoning or calling out, using any words which occur to you. He comes over and says, 'Were you calling me? My name is such and such'. Similarly God Himself in the role of the spiritual preceptor (*Guru*) discloses His Name to the pilgrim wandering in search of a guide. After initiation, random efforts are over for the pupil (*śiṣya*). He has touched the lifeline which will lead him to the goal. In the ultimate analysis, the disciple realizes that he is One with the Name and the *Guru*. And how can it be otherwise? He alone can impart the gift of this Name and none but He Himself can sustain the knowledge of His Name."

Sri Anandamayi had no *Guru* in the ordinary sense of the word. On the night of *Rākhī Pūrṇimā* she, as usual, cooked and served the evening meal to her family at about 9 p.m. Her own food she used to keep aside and eat only late at night when she got up from her *sādhanā*. Indeed, for months she had only this one meal daily at midnight or later and frequently, none whatsoever. Earlier that evening her neighbours had come to invite her to go with them to see the special decorations in the temples, but she had declined to accompany them. When her family had retired to rest, she sat in her corner for her daily worship. After sometime

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she watched her finger draw a mystic design *(yantra)* on the floor. She herself became the *Guru*; a *Bīja-mantra* (name of the Lord in the form of a syllable) came from within her, as it were. This *mantra* she wrote with her finger inside the design already drawn on the floor; she was also the *śiṣya* and, accepting the *mantra*, she now started repeating it. She realized that the *mantra* was not separate from her and that *Guru, mantra* and *Iṣṭa* were One.

For the next five months her *sādhanā* assumed a more concrete form. After the *līlā* of spiritual initiation, *mantras* and hymn-like compositions in Sanskrit would at times spontaneously flow from her lips, generally preceded by the utterance of the single syllable OM. Needless to say, she had no previous knowledge of either Sanskrit or these compositions. One night Bholanath woke up to find her doing *japa* counting with her fingers. Nirmala had seen her grandmother do *japa* in this manner, and now she watched her own fingers keeping count in a similar fashion.

During that time the normal functions of her body were suspended for hours and even days. She did not feel-hungry or sleepy. Her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights—there was only one prolonged period of indescribable bliss. She has said that her mouth would have the flavour of a honey-like substance which came from within and which became so profuse at times that she would have to swallow it down. But it left no bad after-taste in her mouth as is usual with sweet things. Sometimes she felt that her body had become as light as a feather and had risen from the floor or again that it had become as heavy and immovable as a rock. Both these conditions of her body have been physically observed by many subsequently.

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While engaged in *sādhanā* she had no sense of bodily pain either. Sometimes, while engaged in performing a complicated *yogic āsana*, her long black tresses got entangled with her limbs and her hair was torn out by the roots. At this period of her life she could not attend to her household work. Bholanath had to look after her as best as he could. A young maid-servant used to come daily to help. She had become very fond of her young mistress and now of her own accord did almost the entire work of the household.

Referring to this period of her life, Sri Anandamayi has said that the question of *sādhanā* did not arise for her, since there was nothing that had to be attained. There was, however, no element of pretence or make-believe in this. For the time being she was a real *sādhikā*, undergoing all the experienees of spiritual life.

Sri Anandamayi has said that the *sādhanās* by which man endeavours to attain Self-realization are of endless variety, and each has innumerable aspects. All these became a living experience to her when she played the role of a *sādhikā*. During this period she went through countless forms of worship, not only the various Hindu forms, but other non-Hindu rites and ceremonies as well. Sri Anandamayi does not talk about the experiences of spiritual life easily and very seldom before the general public. But there are men and women in India and abroad, belonging to different religions, who can testify to her profound understanding of their particular problems and who have derived hope, solace and encouragement from her.

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On rare occasions, Sri Anandamayi does relate something about her life as a *sādhikā*. When people express their astonishment at the variety and wealth of her experiences, she says that what she has so far disclosed is not even one-thousandth part of what actually took place.

Bholanath's Cikṣā :

During this period of intensive *sādhanā*, one of Mataji's cousins, Nishikanta Bhattacharya, came to visit them. He was amazed to see Nrimala's condition and strongly disapproved of Bholanath's tolerance of it. One day, when Nirmala was sitting in a *yogic* posture, he entered the room with the intention of expostulating with her about the matter. Normally, in accordance with village customs, Nirmala kept her face veiled in his presence. But that day her demeanour was quite unusual and she did not attempt to cover her face. Moreover, when Nishikanta spoke to her, she looked straight at him and spoke in such a strange voice that he was taken aback and was silent. Then Nirmala said in a milder tone, "Don't be afraid. What is it ?"

Nishikanta asked : "Why do you perform all these *kriyās* and *āsanas ?* Have you been initiated into spiritual life ?"

"Yes".

"Has Ramani also been initiated ?"

"No, but he will be after five months."

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She also specified a particular day and date with its presiding auspicious star.

"I do not understand what you mean by the star."

"Go and ask Janaki Sen who is fishing at the pond. He will understand."

Now, Nirmala had no way of knowing Janaki Sen's whereabouts, especially as he should have been at his office at that time. Janaki Babu was, however, found near the pond and on being fetched was able to explain what she had meant by the star. He also was struck by her extra-ordinary appearance. It was obvious to them that they were in the presence of a personality who was far removed from their ordinary world. This exalted mood lasted for some time.

When Nishikanta had recovered somewhat from the first impact of her personality, he said, "Give us some proof of your spiritual powers". Nirmala beckoned her husband to approach her and sit down near her. She then touched him. He immediately became still and seemed absorbed in deep meditation. Bholanath's little nephew Ashu was also staying with them at that time. Bewildered by all these unusual activities he began to cry. Nirmala looked at the crying boy and again touched Bholanath. He seemed to awaken as if from a deep sleep. He could not describe in words what he had experienced but for some time remained in an ecstatic condition.

The next morning, Nirmala reverted back to her normal ways and went about her work as usual. The day that she

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had specified for Bholanath's *dīkṣā* drew near. Although she had not mentioned the matter again, he remembered the date, and on the particular day, with a vague idea of avoiding anything that might happen, he hurried off to his office without taking his breakfast. The disciple is expected to keep a complete fast until the initiation is over. Unintentionally Bholanath fulfilled this condition. At the appointed hour, Nirmala sent for him. Bholanath replied that he was busy and could not leave his office. Nirmala then had the message conveyed that, if he did not come immediately, she would herself go to the office. Not daring to risk this, Bholanath reluctantly came home. Nirmala handed him fresh clothes and told him to bathe and then sit down on an *āsana* (small square piece of carpet) which she had kept ready for him. Bholanath seated himself and composedly awaited further developments. By this time Nirmala was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. Sonorous *mantras* were spontaneously pouring forth from her lips. A little later Bholanath heard her repeating just one *mantra* softly to herself. He leant forward, and bringing his ear close to her lips, managed to catch the sound of the *mantra*. He concluded correctly that it was meant for him.

When the exalted mood had passed, Nirmala gave him detailed instructions how to use the *mantra* he had heard. With her, *mantras* and ritualisms were self-revealed. That they were perfectly correct and in accordance with relevant scriptures was borne out years later when she came in contact with people who were well-versed in these matters.

One other person only, Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai, had the rare distinction of receiving a *mantra* from Sri Anandamayi in a similar manner. Sri Anandamayi has no other disciple in the accepted sense of the word.

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From the month of December 1922, Nirmala became *mauna*, that is, completely silent. This state, like all other changes, came about spontaneously. The special feature of Nirmala's *mauna* was that it precluded not only speech but also gesture of any kind. Even her facial expression did not change, to indicate approval or disapproval. During this time Bholanath's youngest brother Jamini Kumar came to Bajitpur for a short visit. He was very depressed to find his sister-in-law observing silence. He would follow her about imploring her to talk to him. One day Nirmala was, as usual, sitting in a *yogic* posture. With the index finger of her right hand she drew an imaginary circle *(kuṇḍalī)* round herself. After this, some *mantras* were uttered by her. Then, in an indistinct voice, which gradually became stronger, she spoke to her young brother-in-law, while sitting inside the *kuṇḍalī*. After a while she wiped off the circle in the same manner, got up and was silent again.

During the three years of her *mauna*, she sometimes broke her silence in a similar way and talked to people if necessary. There were, however, no rules nor fixed times for these occasional breaks of her silence.

While in Bajitpur, Bholanath once expressed the wish to own a house where he could perform the annuab *Vāsantī-Pūjā* of the Goddess Durga.

Nirmala answered spontaneously, "Why, you already have a house. Gokul Thakur's house in Dacca is yours."

Bholanath could make nothing of this at that time. But the name lingered in his memory and he was reminded of it years later in Dacca.

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It became evident to Bholanath very soon that Sri Anandamayi had a vision which transcended the limitations of time and space. One day Nirmala remarked, "I hear the voice of Hara Kumar". Bholanath was sceptical about this because they had not heard about him for years. But sure enough, after some time Hara Kumar and Kshetra Mohan of Ashtagram were seen approaching their house. Hara Kumar was singing as he came along. After this meeting they did not see Hara Kumar again.

On another occasion Nirmala asked Bholanath, "What is Arabia?" He told her that it was the name of a country. She then said, "I saw two *fakirs* from Arabia, a *guru* and his disciple. I saw them so vividly that had I been an artist, I could have painted their portraits."

A year or so later Nirmala had occasion to visit the graves of two *fakirs* in Dacca. Her description of their appearances was confirmed by those who had seen the holy men.

The affairs of the Nawab of Dacca were not running smoothly. His agent in Bajitpur, Bhudeb Basu, went back to Dacca. Bholanath's post also was terminated in April 1924. He was again obliged to look for employment and decided to go to Dacca for the purpose.

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Chapter Four

DACCA : LIFE AT SHAHBAGH : 1924-1926

Bholanath lost his post in April 1924. His employers, for reasons of economy, were winding up their business in Bajitpur. Hoping for better employment in a bigger town, he came to Dacca with his wife on April 10, 1924. In spite of his best efforts he was unable to find work immediately. He decided to send Nirmala to his village home and stay on alone. She asked him to let her stay for three more days, saying she would go home if he did not get a job within that time. Bholanath found work on the third day. On April 17, he secured a post as the Manager of the extensive Shahbagh Gardens belonging to Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. He was appointed by Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, the Trustee of the Nawabzadi's estates in Dacca. Jogesh Chandra Ghosh had heard a little about Nirmala from his son-in-law, Bhudeb Basu, who had known her and Bholanath in Bajitpur.

The gardens were very extensive, filled with a variety of fruit-trees and also seasonal flowers. In one corner of the big estate, adjoining an artificial swimming pool, there was a small building for the Manager. The entire property was enclosed by a high wall, because ladies from the Nawab's family sometimes came to visit the garden and bathe in the swimming pool. The property was so big, that much of it had remained unkept and overgrown with wild shrubberies and creepers.

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The Manager's house consisted of three rooms only. There was a beautiful hall nearby, used by the owners for dances and other cultural programmes.

It was Bholanath's job to supervise the work of a gang of labourers and to look after the property. After they had settled in, Bholanath's nephew Ashu came to stay with them.

Nirmala was still observing silence. For the greater part of the day she would be in an exalted state, absorbed in a world of her own. Even so, she would get up early in the morning to prepare a meal for Ashu. After sending him off to school she would take the used utensils to the pond, clean them and again cook for the mid-day *bhoga**. It is not unusual for people to consecrate food at their own convenience rather than at the proper mid-day hour. Nirmala, however, would not think of doing it. Neither could she serve Ashu with the left-overs from a previous meal. True to her nature, she accomplished all the housework competently and gracefully.

The exalted moods and states of *bhāva* became more frequent and of longer duration since the days of her *līlā* of *sādhanā* at Bajitpur. While serving food, her hand would stop midway; while cleaning utensils at the pond, she would fall into the water and lie half-immersed in it for a long time; she would get scorched by the fire of the kitchen oven or imperil herself in other ways

Bnolanath had to be away from home for long hours everyday. He began to worry about her physical well-being.

* Food consecrated to the family deity. If there is no family deity installed in the house then the food is dedicated to God. No Brahmin is expected to eat unconsecrated food.

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He decided to ask his widowed sister Matari to stay with them. Matari *Pisima* (Aunt Matari) had visited Revati Mohan's family before and was very friendly with Nirmala. She was a short and slender person with a cheerful smile. It was a wonder to see her manipulating cooking utensils which were big and heavy enough to suffice for preparing food for fifty people or more. An enduring bond of friendship developed between the two sisters-in-law, which lasted till Aunt Matari's death in Varanasi in 1959.* Many devotees cherish grateful memories of Matari *Pisima's* wonderful cooking and affectionate way of serving food. The little family at Shahbagh was thus augmented by two new members, Aunt Matari and her son Amulya. Nirmala now had a companion who lightened her work considerably and Ashu had a friend to play and go to school with.

Janaki Sen and Bhudeb Basu had also come to Dacca. From them and other chance visitors at Shahbagh people began to hear about Nirmala. Some inquisitive souls came to see Anandamayi with their own eyes and were attracted to return again and yet again. All that the men could see, and that from a distance, was the figure of a veiled young woman. The cross section of society that Nirmala now entered, consisted of educated men and their families. Religion did not play too important a part in their lives. Some of the families had never heard a *kīrtana* or seen a ritualistic worship of a deity *(pūjā)*. However, it remains a fact that many people paid homage to her and behaved as if they were in the presence of a personality of great spiritual eminence. She was now generally referred to reverentially as Mother. We shall refer to her henceforth as Mataji as she is better known today.

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* By this time Mataji had become very well-known and was often too busy to speak more than a few words to the inmates of the Ashramas. Even so, there would be a quiet exchange of jokes in dialect between them not understood by many of Mataji's companions of those days.

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The fact that Mataji exercises a very powerful attraction on young and old alike has to be accepted, because it is so. Those who have seen Mataji, realize that she makes a tremendous impression on people without uttering a single word or without even looking directly at them. Mataji is now 73 years old, but this feature of her personality remains unchanged. The old, the young and even children find it difficult to tear themselves away from her presence. There are hundreds of families comprising of more than two or even three generations who are now completely devoted to her. Mataji herself sometimes explains this phenomenon in these words: "Is it not natural and spontaneous to love one's own?"

The early devotees, however, had to run the gauntlet of criticisms that ranged from sheer indifference and disregard to sneering insinuations. Nirmala was young and beautiful. This for sometime acted as a barrier for men mindful of the opinion of society. Women, on the other hand, had free access to her presence. Her charm and winsomeness captivated their hearts.

Prominent among her early visitors was Hiranbala Ghosh,* now known to all as Hirandidi. It became Hirandidi's daily practice to visit the 'young wife' at Shahbagh. Her mother-in-law was not happy. "Why do you need to go to Shahbagh everyday? Religion can be practised at home also", she would say. How could Hirandidi explain to her mother-in-law that she had no religious aspirations, but simply could not rest at home till she had seen Mataji at least once daily? She now humourously recalls that her first impression of Mataji as related to her family was, "She is such a beautiful and

* The wife of Sri Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and the daughter-in-law of Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh.

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charming girl. What a pity, she is dumb. But she smiles so sweetly and is marvellously neat and efficient in all her work. If only she could speak !"*

Bholanath liked to entertain guests to meals. These early devotees quickly acquired a taste for Mataji's cooking. They would bring fish, vegetables and other things to Shahbagh. It was Mataji's practice to use up everyday whatever had been brought by them. She would keep nothing for the next day not even a green chilli or a piece of ginger. But the meal also had to be balanced and tasty. Mataji with her imaginative ideas would prepare wonderful dishes from the materials at hand and win the admiration of the womenfolk who were frequently at a loss to understand how this was done. Not the least remarkable feature about these meals was that invariably the food would be just sufficient for the number of participants. Nothing would be wasted and nobody would go away disappointed. This sort of coincidence or concurrence of incidents and timings is a very regular feature of Mataji's life even today. Anybody who stays with her for sometime, may see one or two instances of it.

Baul Chandra used to bring cleaned and powdered spices to save Mataji the work of grinding them for the day's cooking, as is the practice in Indian households. One day, while Mataji was arranging these packets, Bholanath was tempted to ask her, "You say, it makes no differnce to you what you eat. Can you eat some of this chilli powder ?" Mataji took a handful of the red powder and put it in her mouth. Even a pinch

* Some of the other regular visitors were Sri Pran Gopal Mukherji (the Deputy Post Master General) and his family; Sri Nishikanta Mitra (the Zamindar of the village of Shamshiddhi) and his family ; Sri Baul Chandra Basak (Lecturer in the Vakil Institution), a boyhood friend of Bholanath and his wife, and Sri Nani Gopai Banerji, Professor at Dacca College.

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of the raw powder burns the tongue and palate of normal human beings, but there was no change of expression on Mataji's face. After a little while she got up and went about her normal household work. The same day Bholanath had an attack of acute blood dysentery. He suffered terribly for a couple of days. Mataji nursed him day and night indefatigably, not leaving his bedside for more than a few minutes at a time. One day Mataji said to him, "I have requested you so many times not to test me like this." Bholanath answered humbly, "I shall not do it again." Responding to Mataji's treatment and nursing, he slowly recovered from his illness.

Walking through the Shahbagh gardens one day Mataji came across a small mausoleum. She was informed by the labourers that many years ago two *fakirs*, a *guru* and his *chelâ*, had come to Dacca from Arabia. The Nawab and his family respected them deeply and had asked them to make Shahbagh their home. After their death, their remains had been interred at Shahbagh itself and the Nawab of Dacca had constructed the mausoleum to house their graves. It may be recalled here that while in Bajitpur, Mataji had asked about an Arab *fakir* and his disciple. She had a vision of a tree and it had occurred to her that it was called the '*Siddheśvarī*' tree.

On coming to Dacca, she had once enquired of Bholanath if he had heard anybody mention a '*Siddheśvarī* tree'. He had replied in the negative and offered to make enquiries. Mataji had told him it was not necessary.

The Shahbagh gardens were situated near the huge race course and polo grounds of Ramna. Mataji frequently walked across this sea of green grass to the Kālī temple on the opposite side. With a few companions she would sit on the

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verandah of the temple for many hours. Baul Chandra sometimes accompanied them on these visits to the temple. On their way back, late at night, he went off on a road, which was hardly more than a rough track. These places were very lonely and unfrequented at that time. One day Bholanath asked him inquisitively, "Where do you go at such a late hour ?" Baul answered, "There is a Kālī temple at Siddheshwari, a little distance off. It is a very ancient and beautiful place. I would like to take you both there some time".

Mataji signalled to Bholanath not to say anything to Baul about her 'vision' of the *Siddheśvarī* tree, and so Bholanath kept quiet.

A few days later, they went to Siddheshwari with Baul. There was no proper road. The rough path that led there had neither been cleared of the encroaching undergrowth nor repaired for many years. A thick cluster of trees smothered by wild creepers made the place look like a jungle.

In the midst of this wilderness, they came to a very ancient temple of Kālī. In front of the temple they saw a huge fallen *peepal* tree. Mataji recognised it as the tree of her 'vision'. She put her hand caressingly on it. Baul told them a little of the history of the place. It was a *siddhapīṭha*, that is, a place of great sanctity, where *sādhakas* had performed vigorous asceticism and had attained *siddhi** (literally, success) or Self-realization. According to local tradition, there was a

* *Siddhis* are of many types. A person may become *vāksiddha* (whatever he says will come true) or attain any of the eight *siddhis*, as for example, *animā*, *mahimā*, *laghimā*, *garimā*, *prāpti*, *prākāmya*, *īsitva* and *vaśitva*, that is, the powers of becoming small, great, light, heavy etc. The true *sādhaka* does not get ensnared by these powers which come automatically to him, but proceeds onwards to the goal of Self-realization, which is the highest *siddhi*.

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*panchamuṇḍī āsana** somewhere near the temple. The local people associated the place with Sri Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) also. Hundreds of years ago there had been only three trees to which the place owed its other name *'Tintiri'*. Now there was this one fallen tree only. According to the legendary history of the place the temple had been constructed by a *sannyāsī*, named Samvarvan. A story was also related about the tree, namely, that when it had fallen, a light had emerged from it and had entered the image of the deity inside the temple.

It had become dark now. They examined the temple and its precincts by the light of the lantern they had brought with them and then returned to Shahbagh.

After a few days, Mataji again came to Siddheshwari, but they were disappointed to find that the temple had been locked up for the night. Mataji went to the door and touched the lock; it came off in her hands. The temple doors stood open.

They perforce had to stay there all night, because they could not leave the temple unlocked and unguarded. When the caretaker returned early next morning, they left for Shahbagh.

In August 1924, Mataji's younger sister Surabala was taken ill at Jaidevapura, a town nearby, where she was staying with her husband's family. Surabala was greatly attached to her elder sister. Mataji and Bholanath visited her for one day. Mataji's parents also came from Vidyakut to see Surabala. Surabala's last conscious thoughts were of her sister. She was sixteen when she died.

‡ A particular type of seat for meditation in a lonely place far removed from human habitation, meant for *Tantric* ascetics only.

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At Bholanath's invitation, Mataji's parents came to stay with them at Shahbagh after the tragic death of the young girl. Bholanath thought that it would be a change for the parents to stay with their daughter and that it would be a preoccupation for Mataji also. Bholanath had yet to learn a lot more about Mataji. He had surmised that she would be overwhelmed with grief, because she was so fond of her younger sister. The realization that health or illness, life or death meant the same to her, came to him gradually.

Indeed, it was after many years that Bholanath and Mataji's other companions began to get an inkling of the absolute self-sufficiency of her personality. It gradually became clear to them that Mataji's actions arose out of the needs of the people around her, that she had no chosen companions or special habitations. One was as good as the other. All this is encompassed in her oft-repeated expression *'jo ho jāye'* (come what may, what does it matter ?).

It was not Mataji's way to do anything spectacular which would arrest the attention of people around her or create a distance between her and her companions. It is one of the most remarkable features of her personality that extra-ordinary events acquire a normalcy where she is concerned. She brought about radical changes, complete matamorphosis in the lives of some of her companions, but without the striking of a single jarring note against any susceptibilities. Her appeal was always to the individual. She never sought to pluck him out of his background for a different way of life. It has been her method to help a man to make the most of his opportunities and capacities. In her presence, there was no room for apathy or despair. A divine presence seemed to permeate the atmosphere. The life of religious endeavour seemed to be the normal way of life rather than a turning away from this world.

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But the devotees had to go a long way before even partial understanding of this personality came to them. For the time being, they were happy to have her parents stay at Shahbagh. Mataji's parents came to be known as *Didimā* (grandmother) and *Dādāmaśāi* (grandfather). *Didimā* was eagerly questioned regarding Mataji's childhood and early years. Subsequently many of these devotees visited Kheora (Mataji's birth-place), Vidyakut, Ashtagram and Bajitpur and derived much pleasure from listening again to accounts about Mataji from local people.

In the beginning of September 1924, Mataji asked Bholanath to purchase some rice, pulses, potatoes and a cocoaunt. One day she and Bholanath went with these articles to Siddheshwari. She cooked the foodstuff she had brought with her, consecrated it to the Deity and then shared it with Bholanath. She then told him that it was her *kheyāla* to stay on in the temple for some days. Bholanath at first demurred since he could not leave her alone in such a lonely place. Ultimately, it was decided that *Dādāmaśāi* would be asked to stay at Siddheshwari during the day and that Bholanath would return there every evening from Shahbagh after work.

Thus, in this most natural way both Mataji's father and husband came to be staying in a temple for a few days in the manner of homeless ascetics. Unknowingly, they had started on a new career.

Bholanath's friend Baul Chandra came to Siddheshwari in the evening with fruit and sweets.

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Mataji took up her abode in the small back room of the temple. She would bathe and change early in the morning and then enter this room. Throughout the day she never came out. There was no question of cooking or partaking of meals. She would emerge late at night and they would all share the fruit brought by Baul. Both friends were courageous men. They came and went through those lonely unfrequented places often in total darkness. Bholanath stayed in the main temple, sometimes doing his *sādhanā*, sometimes just resting. Baul posted himself at the main entrance of the temple. He had a feeling that something miraculous was going to take place, and in order not to miss it, he would keep awake the whole night. In this manner they spent a week at Siddheshwari.

The following incidents may best be related in Mataji's own words. "On the eighth day, it was drizzling at dawn. Beckoning Bholanath, who was awake, to follow me, I* stepped out of the temple. We almost had to walk over Baul Babu, but he did not wake up. Tired out by his night-long vigil, he had fallen asleep at the break of day."

"Although we were not familiar with the surroundings, I unhesitatingly advanced in a northern direction from the temple. Walking a little distance through the wilderness we came to a small clearing. I seemed to have arrived at my destination and walked round that particular plot of ground thrice in the manner of *pradakṣiṇā*†. Then, drawing a circle, I sat down where I was standing, facing south. What you call *mantras* were then pronounced. In the meantime, I had placed my

* When referring to herself, Mataji generally says, 'This body', meaning there is no act of will to motivate her action. In these accounts the personal pronoun has been used.

† The ritual of walking round a Deity or temple three times.

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right hand on the ground and was leaning on it. The ground had looked solid enough but my hand went down into the earth unresisted. It felt as if layer after layer of the solid earth was sliding off, like removal of curtains, and my hand and arm went down unimpeded right up to the shoulder. Bholanath got frightened and pulled out my arm, saying, 'Let us go away from here'. At the same time, warm reddish water spouted forth from the hole thus made in the ground. The water was so red that my white conch bangle had become red. This colour lasted for many days."

"I then asked Bholanath to insert his arm into the hole. At first he felt a little reluctant". I said, "Don't be afraid, it is necessary for you to do this". Thereupon Bholanath also put his arm, and the warm reddish water again welled forth from the mouth of the hole. We stood there for sometime watching the water trickling away on the ground. Then, after stopping the mouth of the hole, we came away".

Baul was very sad when he realized that he had after all missed witnessing this strange incident, but took it upon himself to clear a space all around the spot and later thoughtfully planted a few flowering shrubs and a *tulasī* to mark the spot.

Pran Gopal, on hearing of this incident, contributed towards the upkeep of the place. With this money a brick platform *(vedī)* about 21" square* was constructed over the hole. A light bamboo fence marked off a piece of ground, 5 yards square, with the *vedī* at the centre.

* The unit of measurement in rituals is the arm of the *yajmāna*, that is, the man who is performing the ritual. This *vedī* was one and a quarter arm square.

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Mataji paid frequent visits to Siddheshwari. She would sit on the *vedī*, surrounded by her companions. Sometimes they were so carried away by feelings of exaltation that they passed whole nights in this fashion, returning to Dacca at dawn. Pran Gopal said that a few months earlier, he would not have believed it possible for him to spend such sleepless nights in the open, with no adverse effect on his health.

The educated people of Dacca were experiencing a new kind of life. Religion was mostly looked upon as a duty or a worthwhile value in life, and nothing more. A new vista of joy and beauty in religious endeavour was now opened out for them.

The quiet life at Shahbagh, however, was about to undergo a change.

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Chapter Five

GATHERING OF DEVOTEES

The crowd of visitors swelled steadily at Shahbagh. Some were known to Bholanath as friends and relations of people already coming to Shahbagh, others were total strangers. If Bholanath asked Mataji to speak to these people, she would do so, but not otherwise. Bholanath was a large-hearted man. He saw the sincerity of these devout men and women, and it was not in him to disappoint them for the sake of conventions.

Mataji told him one day, "You must think twice before you open the doors to the world in this manner. Remember that you will not be able to stem the tide when it becomes overwhelming." Bholanath did not heed this warning. Or perhaps, who could know better than him that Mataji's personality was not meant to be hidden within the four walls of his home? So, acceding to Bholanath's request, Mataji now mixed more freely with people.

One day, the Rai Bahadur's son Prafulla spoke to Bholanath disapproving of the large number of visitors inside the Shahbagh gardens. Bholanath was greatly angered by this unmerited rebuke, because he was very conscientious about his work and took good care of the property under his management. He was ready to hand in his resignation but was dissuaded from doing so, for the time being, by Mataji. Meanwhile Prafulla reported to his father that a number of unauthorised persons were coming to Shahbagh every day and creating disturbance,

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A few days later, the Rai Bahadur came to Shahbagh to see for himself what the report was about. He did not say anything about this to Bholanath but invited him and Mataji to his house for a meal. They took great care to prepare food for Mataji according to orthodox conventions. The Rai Bahadur evidently had not been influenced by his son. Bholanath accepted the invitation.

At this time, the *Nawabzadi* Pyaribanu, the owner of the estate of Shahbagh, was in Calcutta. She had not come to Dacca for many years due to personal reasons. She was engaged in a law suit concerning her estate in Dacca. The day Mataji came to the Rai Bahadur's house, he heard some adverse news about the case. He appealed to Bholanath to request Mataji to ascertain for them details of the case that was being conducted in Calcutta and also prayed that the *Nawabzadi* might win it. It has already been said that Bholanath was a very kind-hearted man. He could not remain indifferent to the agitation and perturbations of this family. Even strangers could nearly always prevail upon him to ask Mataji to cure illnesses or redress other ills. He could never remain deaf to a tale of woe. Mataji did her best to obey him, so now at his insistence, she described the events taking place in Calcutta and said that they would win the case. Before answering their questions, Mataji had, unknown to others, placed a live coal on the back of her hand. Much later, she explained the reasons for this deliberate infliction of wound in the following words: "Well, it is possible to do a certain action *(kriyā)* which will have some concrete effect in some other sphere. Or again, it is also said that if *yogic* powers are used deliberately, then the *sādhaka* has to perform penance *(prāyaśchitta)* for it. This body sometimes had the attitude of a *sādhaka*. I do not say that this was so—but these or other explanations also are possible."

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What Mataji had said about the law suit was fully confirmed later on. With Mataji's visit, a new influence permeated the household of the Rai Bahadur. A subtle change was effected which became noticeable as time passed.

The number of visitors to Shahbagh started swelling into crowds now. Pran Gopal Mukherji had been transferred from Dacca. His successor to the post, Pramatha Nath Basu, also became one of the regular visitors. Pran Gopal's friend, Girija Shankar Bhattacharya, and his wife came from Rajshahi to Dacca to see Mataji. He was a Professor at Rajshahi College. In his turn he invited his friend and colleague Atal Bihari Bhattacharya and his wife to Dacca. This couple also became closely attached to Mataji. Atal Bihari had a very open-hearted childlike nature full of fun and mischief. His conversations and, later on, letters to Mataji became a source of enjoyment to her other companions.

Dr. Shashanka Mohan Mukherji and his daughter Sm. Adarini Devi (now known to all devotees as Sm. Gurupriya Devi or as *Didi*, that is, elder sister) met Mataji for the first time in either the last week of December 1925 or the beginning of January 1926. Dr. Shashanka Mohan Mukherji was a retired Civil Surgeon of Dacca. He was then an old man of sixty, of a very fiery temperament, held in great awe by the Dacca Medical School. Yet, in Mataji's presence he was like a tongue-tied child. His is an untarnished record of selfless devotion and unquestioning obedience to Mataji from the moment of his first meeting to the moment he breathed his last.

Didi was his third child. She had protested against getting married, but her parents had not attached much importance to this reluctant attitude. She was married to Rai Bahadur Surendra Nath Banerji of Calcutta. But when the time came for her to go

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to her husband's house, her disinclination became convincing to both families. She wrote to her husband requesting him to marry again. Both families agreed to respect her wishes. Didi stayed on with her parents. She was fond of reading and divided her time between the study of religious literature and helping her mother to look after the large household. Ordinarily, it was inconceivable that a young woman of a respectable family would leave home to follow a religious life. There were no suitable places for sheltering women who did not want to follow either of the beaten tracks of marriage or a career. So she remained at home.

Didi recalls her first meeting with Mataji in these words: "I was very shy by nature. It was extremely difficult for me to talk to strangers or even come out before visitors at home. My parents would scold me for this, but I could not get over my timidity. But I did not feel shy before Mataji. I approached her confidently and stood near her as if I had always known her. It is beyond my power to describe the personality I saw. One look at that radiantly beauteous form, and my head, of its own accord, bowed down in adoration."

Mataji smiled a welcome and said familiarly: "Where have you been all this time?" Mataji's *mauna* had come to an end after about three years and she now spoke in a soft voice to the people coming to visit her.

Didi used to go to Shahbagh every day with her father. She would eagerly wait for her father's return from the Medical School in the evening. If he was delayed, she would be in an agony of suspense till she saw his carriage. The time she had to spend at home away from Shahbagh seemed meaningless to her. She gradually began to assist Mataji in looking after her ever-expanding household. She would help with cooking, serving

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food or in guarding the person of Mataji when in an exalted state. In time she became a member of the household at Shahbagh. Didi recalls that she had no interest in cooking. In Mataji's company she learnt to look upon this art as something more than a means of keeping body and soul together.

Thus, many families in Dacca became very attached to Mataji. Whoever came first, wanted others to share in the joy of this unparallelled experience, and so entire families, including the old and the young, would gather at Shahbagh. The men would sit with Bholanath. Sometimes Mataji, accompanied by their wives and daughters, would sit in the same room and talk to all of them. But the time was fast approaching when Mataji's circle would expand beyond the imagination of this exclusive group of people.

On the occasion of solar eclipse on January 26th, the devotees wanted to perform *kīrtana* on a large scale. Bholanath welcomed the suggestion and enthusiastically set about making arrangements with the help of Baul, Atal Bihari and others. The dance-hall was made available to them for this purpose. A large number of people was invited. Everybody who came to the *kīrtana* would partake of *prasāda* at night.

The *kīrtana* started at about 10 A.M. Mataji, with her women companions, sat in a room nearby from where they could watch and hear the *kīrtana*. Mataji's state of ecstasy on hearing the *kīrtana* may best be described in Didi's words :

"At one moment Mataji was sitting like one of us. The next moment she had changed completely. Her body started

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swaying rhythmically. Her *śāri* fell back from her head. Her eyes were closed and the entire body swayed to the rhythm of the *kīrtana*. With her body still swaying, she stood up or rather was, as if drawn upwards on her toes. It looked as if Mataji had left her body which had become an instrument in the hands of an invisible power. It was obvious to all of us that there was no will motivating her actions. Mataji was evidently quite oblivious of her surroundings. She circled round the room as if wafted along by the wind. Occasionally, her body would start falling to the ground — but before it completed the movement it would regain its upright position, just like a wind-blown leaf which flutters towards the ground and then is uplifted and blown forward by a fresh gust of wind. It seemed her body had no weight nor substance. Moving in this manner, Mataji crossed the *verandah* and entered the *kīrtana* hall, her gaze unblinkingly fixed in an upward direction, her face glowing with a wonderful light. Before the crowd had time to realize that she was in their midst, she fell to the ground from an upright position but did not appear to be hurt at all. Like a leaf in a whirlwind, her body started rolling at a tremendous speed while she was lying prostrate. Some of the women tried to hold her, but it was beyond their power to check even a little of that force."

"After a few moments, her body, of its own accord, stopped moving and Mataji sat up. Now she was still like a statue. Just as the tremendous motion of the body had been awe-inspiring, now the utter quiescence was likewise wondrous to behold. Her face was flushed and radiant and there was an effulgence all around her."

After sometime, Mataji began to sing a few lines of a *kīrtana**—

* Names of the Lords.

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Hare Murāre, Madhukaiṭabhāre,
Gopāla, Govinda, Mukunda, Śaure

Mataji's wonderful voice and melody made the *kīrtana* sound celestial and thrilled the hearts of the congregation, already overwhelmed. People were standing with folded hands as if in the presence of a Deity. Many were reciting hymns to the Devī Durgā.

After a few moments, Mataji's body slumped down in a heap on the floor as if lifeless. She lay in that condition for a long time. Bholanath roused her with great difficulty. Mataji sat up although it was clear that her limbs were not yet under control. She spoke a few words to the ladies around her. Her words were indistinct and slurred and could hardly be made out, but her ineffable smile was never absent for long from her face.

Evening drew near. At Bholanath's request, Mataji and Didi brought the *bātāsās* (sugar puffs) and fruit for the *kīrtana* to the hall. Placing these offerings near the pedestal of the *kīrtana* Mataji, surrounded by the women, sat in one corner of the room this time.

After some time, Mataji again got up and moved into the midst of the *kīrtana* party. A variety of *bhāvas* manifested themselves on her body, all marvellous to behold. Now it seemed that she was engaged in a great battle — the expression on her face was fierce and even her complexion had darkened — then it appeared that she was performing *ārati* with her entire body. The fierce expression of a moment ago changed into a beautiful gesture of supplication. The *bhāvas* were too numerous and were changing too rapidly to permit more than a glimpse of them.

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Later, Mataji sat down in one corner of the room. Although she was perfectly quiet, it appeared that something was trying to find expression from within her. After a few moments, *mantra*-like verses flowed from her lips spoken in some beautiful language that sounded like Sanskrit. The congregation listened spell-bound to the sonorous tones, but the meaning was beyond the grasp of anybody. Then the voice became silent and once more Mataji's body lay in a heap on the floor.

It had already become quite late. The *kīrtana* was over. The devotees were waiting to take *prasāda*. Bholanath and the women tried to rouse Mataji, calling her repeatedly and rubbing her hands and feet. She got up with an effort after a little while and said to Bholanath, "Please collect everybody, we shall serve the food". Mataji now proceeded to walk through the rows of people serving food neatly and efficiently. One could hardly imagine that this was the same person who had been in an ecstatic state earlier on.

A great concourse of people partook of the *prasāda* that day. They went away with full hearts. They felt that they had been vouchsafed a glimpse of a wondrous world, unutterably beautiful and ennobling.

Didi records that she had read about the *mahābhāvas* of Sri Gouranga and Sri Ramakrishna. But she could not have imagined anything as awe-inspiring and enthralling as what she had seen that day.

It was almost dawn by the time the last visitors left.

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The musical instruments which had been procured for the *kīrtana* remained at Shahbagh for some time. Mataji one day suggested that they might as well be utilised for the performance of a brief *kīrtana* every evening. Matori Pisima's son Amulya and Ashu took up the suggestion with great enthusiasm, and with the help of Bholanath they formed the nucleus of a *kīrtana* party which kept on swelling steadily.

Almost every day innumerable states of *bhāva* manifested themselves in Mataji's body. The external stimulus of *kīrtana* was not necessary to bring them about. As a matter of fact, Mataji was more often in an exalted than in a normal state. Or, rather, it would be more correct to say that the exalted and normal were so mingled in her that they were one. As before in Bajitpur, her days were not divided into mornings, evenings and nights. Sometimes she would stay awake the whole night and with the coming of dawn curl up in a corner of the room on the floor. She very rarely used her bed. She would more often lie or sit on the bare floor. Sometimes she would lean against her cot and spend the whole night in that posture.

After the day of the solar eclipse, many people got the opportunity of witnessing these *bhāvas*. The eye-witnesses say that Mataji's *bhāvas* cannot be described in words. The shape and substance of her body, the colour of her skin, and the expressions on her face underwent incredible changes. Her countenance would be flushed and glowing. At times, her body would move at a tremendous speed and then again be immovable like a rock. Actions, gestures and facial expressions would change so rapidly as to defy observation. Her movements were like swift flashes of lightning. It was well-nigh impossible for anyone to keep track of her progress through the crowd.

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Even a brief view of the matchless beauty of this display of the ecstatic mood held the devotees enthralled. The onlookers were lifted out of themselves as if in the presence of a mighty phenomenon.

Not only during the *kīrtana* but anywhere and at any time Mataji would enter into a *bhāva*. Her body seemed to get in tune with motions in her environment. The rippling waves in the wake of a boat drew her irresistibly to them, so that her body would seem to flow towards the water. The climbing of stairs would give her body a buoyancy which seemed to be soaring upward. If caught in a sudden storm, her body seemed like a wind-blown cloth. Sometimes it became still and immobile on hearing the deep notes of the temple conch ; the rhythm of an inspired *kīrtana* would move her to an ecstatic dance.

After a *bhāva*, Mataji would sometimes lie in a heap for hours together. People conjectured that this was a *yogic* state of *samādhi*. Not only after a *bhāva* but in the midst of conversation or work, her gaze would become fixed, and her body rigid and statue-like. Or, her eyes would close and the body sink down on the floor. Like the slowly setting sun in the west, all bodily functions would gradually disappear as if withdrawing inwards. Breathing would slow down and finally stop altogether. Her limbs occasionally became rigid like wooden appendages and then again limp like cloth. Her entire body would become luminous and on her face there would be an expression of indescribable peace.

After ten, twelve or twentyfour hours of a state of this kind, people would try to rouse her but mostly to no effect. An eye-witness* says, "I myself rubbed her hands and feet and

* Śri Jyotish Chandra Rai

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sometimes struck sharply against them, but elicited no response. Many doctors tried to feel her pulse or locate signs of respiration, but apparently both functions were absent for hours together."

Mataji would rouse herself of her own accord — her breath coming back faintly and then more vigorously. There would be some slight movement of the muscles of her limbs. But, after a little while, she would again settle down into immobility as if going back to the previous state. At this stage, she would respond if people called her or spoke to her. She would drag open her eyes with an effort and whisper a few words that sounded faint and indistinct. But her peculiarly own bewitching smile would comfort her companions and reassure them of her conscious presence in their midst.

Didi writes that the difference between Mataji's normal state and the state of *samādhi* was one of degree only. Even in the midst of ordinary housework, she seemed in a beatific atmosphere of her own. If not spoken to for any length of time or made to answer questions, her speech would become indistinct and lisping as if she had to make an effort to use her vocal chords. One day, Didi came to Shahbagh and found her lying on the bare floor in *samādhi*, her clothes and face covered with red ants. Although Shahbagh was more often than not filled with visitors now, close companions who could look after Mataji's person were few in number. Didi writes, "It amazed me that Mataji should be so naturally in a permanent state of God-intoxication, a state which is coveted by *sādhakas* of all times. No, not God-intoxication — her state could not be called that — I do not know how to describe a state which was at once sublime and yet normal."

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that there was

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any element of pretence or make-believe in these *bhāvas*. A devotee asked Mataji one day, "Do you have visions of gods and goddesses during these *bhāvas*?" (Mataji was sometimes seen in the posture of various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and perhaps others, not recognized as such by the people.) Mataji answered, "It is not necessary because I do not aspire to any goal or ideal". She meant, probably, that in this process there was no intention to fix attention on the form of a god or goddess, to have such visions. "All of you want to see these manifestations and, therefore, they now and then occur of their own accord. For me, the states of *bhāva*, as you call them, are not different from what you call a normal state."

About *samādhi*, she said one day, "The consummation of action and feeling may be called *samâdhi*. It is a state where the question of knowledge and ignorance does not arise. A stage comes when the *sādhaka* realizes that he is one with his object of contemplation. From that plane he may again come back to ordinary level of self-consciousness. This type of *samādhi* also must be transcended. The ultimate state, being unparallelled, cannot be explained or expressed in any language. It is solely a matter of direct experience."

After about a month of the *kīrtana* on January 26, came the day of the Annual Sarasvatī-Pūjā. The students of the Medical School wanted to invite Mataji to their function. But Dr. Shashanka Mohan refused them permission, thinking that if Mataji had *bhāvas* during the *kīrtana*, it would become a matter of public discussion. From this it might be conjectured that they

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then fought shy of publicity. They had as yet no conception of Mataji's unique personality.

Various theories were advanced, contested and held in Dacca about Mataji at that time. The simple people believed her to be an incarnation of the Goddess Kālī, the presiding deity of Bengal. She was known as '*Mānuṣa Kālī*', that is, 'Kālī in human form'. The more sophisticated opinion was that she was a *sādhikā* of great spiritual powers or alternately a person who had attained self-realization and remained in the world in order to help other pilgrims on the way.

Mataji herself had nothing to say about such speculations. She continued to cook and clean and to look after Bholanath and her nephews to the best of her ability. The fact remained that there was a spiritual aura round her which affected all her companions and visitors, at least temporarily, and in some cases permanently. In her presence the adventure of the spiritual life acquired new dimensions and unique significance. For many, it became the most worthwhile pursuit of human existence.

Pramatha Nath Basu and his wife were constant visitors at Shahbagh. They were a devout couple. One day his wife came and said to Mataji that she wished to observe silence on Mondays and devote some time to her religious practices. Unless she made some such rule, it was difficult to snatch even a few moments from her housework.

Mataji approved of this resolve. As soon as Pramatha Nath heard of this, he came to Mataji and said, "I can't allow my wife to forge ahead in religious matters and leave me behind.

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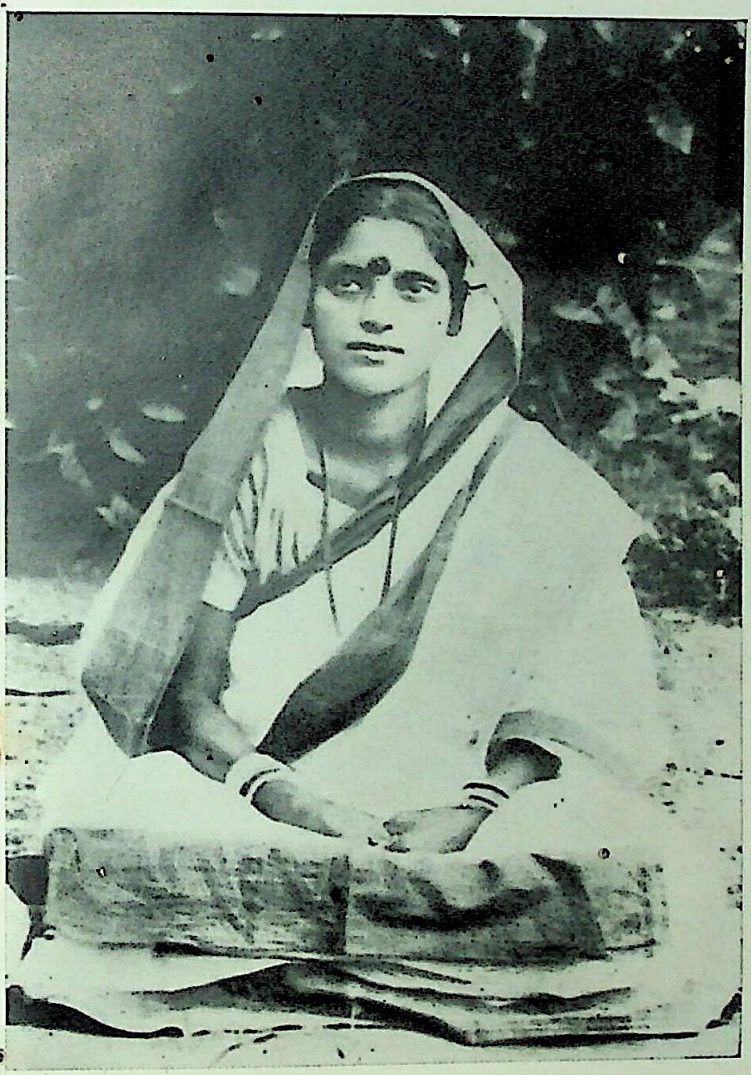

Mataji at Shahbagh

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Please permit me to observe silence one day before her. If she keeps silence on Mondays, I shall do so on Sundays." Mataji smilingly agreed to this and told him the *kriyā* for becoming *mauna*.

On Monday morning, his son Prafulla came to Shahbagh with a message from his father that he could not speak! It was time for him to go to his office. A whole day's work lay ahead. His staff were waiting for him and he was unable to utter a word! Mataji went to their house and communicated to him the *kriyā* for breaking silence. She said to him, "What can I do? You only asked me to tell you how to become silent; you did not ask me to tell you how to terminate it."

Pramatha Nath continued observing silence regularly after this incident, a practice which he had started almost as a game of competition with his wife.

After some time, Pramatha Nath was assailed by doubts. He bethought himself, "Everybody says that she is the Devī Kālī, but I personally have not seen anything which might confirm this view." He secretly made up his mind that he would believe in her only if she appeared to him in the form of *Chhinnamastā**, that is, the most distinctive of the ten forms of *Mahāvidyās*† of the goddess, described as being headless.

It so happened that on that particular day, Mataji, accompanied by Bholanath and Pramatha Nath, went to Siddheshwari, as she frequently used to do.

Bholanath lay down on the temple *verandah*. Mataji sat close by. Pramatha Nath and his very devout orderly sat near

* See Glossary. † See Glossary

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them, both doing *japa*. Suddenly Mataji stood up. She was in a state of *bhāva* and the two men gazed at her with folded hands. They were not perturbed, because whatever be Mataji's physical condition, she never evoked anything but reverence in the onlookers. There was always beauty and grace in the most startling of her states of *bhāva*. Now her complexion appeared very dark, her black hair fell all around her in a cloud ; her eyes were huge and unblinking like those of a statue ; her tongue hung out over her chin. In an instant, her head bent completely back to rest between the shoulder blades. The body appeared to be headless. A moment later, she sat down and was her normal self. When Pramatha Nath had recovered a little from the impact of this vision, he looked round towards his orderly and asked him if he had seen anything unusual in Mataji. He also, obviously overwhelmed, was sitting with folded hands. "Yes, Sahib", he answered, "I saw the forms of the *Mahāvidyās* in Mataji when she stood up just now." Pramatha Nath got up and embraced his orderly, "You are luckier than I", he exclaimed.

These families have kept in touch with Mataji. She is occasionally visited by their children who are grown up with children of their own now. She is kept informed of all important (and not so important) changes and incidents connected with their lives.

Not the least remarkable feature of Mataji's personality is that she remembers everybody she came across as clearly as if she had met them recently. Devotees belonging to different places came to know one another and a bond was forged amongst them which had a peculiarity of its own. Mataji became the centre of an ever-expanding family.

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Chapter Six

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE MIRACULOUS

Mataji's life, during this time was full of extra-ordinary incidents. Manifestations of *yogic* powers became the norm rather than otherwise. It will be wrong, however, to draw lines of demarcation between stages of Mataji's life. She did not become different from what she was, but there was an accentuation and prolification of what ordinarily is called the miraculous at this time. Mataji has said, "I had the *kheyāl* to be like a *sādhaka,* so it was but natural that the characteristics attending intense *sādhanā* should occur spontaneously. The earnest *sādhaka* does not attach any importance to these powers which develop in him. He may not make any deliberate use of them. But all the same people may derive great benefit from the abundance which overflows his conscious efforts."

At that time people from far and near came to Shahbagh to beg her to cure physical ailments. Cures would be effected by a glance, a touch, the gift of a flower, or in a hundred other ways. Instances of such cures are too numerous to be recorded in this volume. In fact, numerous devotees will be able to relate from their own experience one or two or more of such examples.

As in all other matters, Mataji's way of helping people was unspectacular but real. One day a very sick child was brought to Shahbagh. The child had lost the use of her limbs and could not move by herself. Mataji was chopping betel-nuts. She tossed one of the pieces a little in front of the child saying 'catch'.

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The child with great difficulty made an effort and picked up the piece of nut. After some days the mother came and reported gratefully that her child had recovered completely and was slowly regaining the use of her limbs.

Needless to say, Mataji never asked anybody to come to her for a cure. As a matter of fact, she rarely said anything about such matters. She would sometimes be compelled to do or say something because of Bholanath who was always greatly moved by the suffering of people.

Ordinarily, Mataji did not attempt to heal anybody. On the contrary, she would say, "Pray to God. He will do what is best for the patient. You cannot know if physical recovery is desirable for him. The only thing for you to do is to look after the patient to the best of your ability and get the best medical advice available. For the rest you must put your trust in God."

Sometimes people insisted on her visiting the patient, in the belief that he would recover if she did so. In such cases, Mataji had her own way of prophesying the future. She would look about her and ask her companions, "What do you say? He is asking me to go because he thinks the patient will pull through. Will it be so?" The companions would generally answer in the affirmative emphatically. She would then continue, "Who knows, since you all say so, perhaps he will come round." In such cases, it was seen that the patient invariably recovered. Didi says, "Although we had all come to know Mataji's peculiar way of foretelling the future, we would, at times, unaccountably hesitate, stammer and fail to give an emphatic reply in the affirmative. Mataji would observe, 'Why are you hesitating like this?' Then perhaps the patient won't regain health. And so it happened always."

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One day, a lady*, who was a frequent visitor, came to request Mataji to visit her home to see her son who was seriously ill. Mataji continued with her usual pursuits, seemingly not paying any attention to what was being said to her. The lady, therefore, appealed to Bholanath, knowing that Mataji would not disoblige him. When Bholanath came to Mataji to speak about it, she at once declared, "What is the use? The boy won't recover." On hearing this, another devotee, who was present, remarked, "In that case Mataji need not go. The family should be told what Mataji has said." But nobody liked to say the subject to the parents. Bholanath had promised the lady in question that he would bring Mataji; so they went to her son on that occasion. After a few days, the lady again came to Mataji to beseech her to save her child. Mataji replied, "Even if I tell you what to do, you will not be able to carry it out." The mother promised to follow instructions faithfully. The simple instructions were not to allow the boy to get up from bed for a certain number of days, probably 18. Immediately after this, the boy started improving slowly, but all of a sudden he took a turn for the worse. On seeing the mother again, Mataji said, "What could I do? He was allowed to get up on Monday". The mother would not believe this, insisting that the boy had not left his bed at all. The boy died a few days later and the mother lost all faith in Mataji. After quite some time she came to know that on the specific day the boy had actually got up from bed and had come out on the *verandah* to see a passing procession. Full of remorse, the bereaved mother came again to Mataji who now had to comfort her in her double sorrow.

On occasions, Mataji, of her own accord, would go out of her way to cure people. One day she was strolling about

* The wife of Atul Datta.

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in the field outside Shahbagh. A cab drove by. Mataji asked her companion to signal to the driver. When he drew near, she climbed in. The cabman asked, "Where will you go ?" Mataji answered. "To your house." The man was a Mohammedan. Without saying another word he drove home. On arrival, they found an old man lying on his death-bed. The relations were weeping. Mataji asked her companion to fetch some sweets. These were distributed amongst the family and neighbours. Mataji then came away. Mataji's companion took pains to find out that the old man recovered from what had appeared to be his last illness.

At times, Mataji would take upon herself the illness of others. The person who had asked for a cure would recover, but Mataji would suffer from the disease for a few days or for a few hours.

Didi one day came to Shahbagh to find Mataji suffering from a sudden cold and cough. On enquiry, she discovered that Pramatha Basu's young son Pratul, who was due to appear at an examination, had felt a severe cold coming on and had prayed to Mataji to prevent this. On that occasion Pratul escaped from any inconvenience due to a cold.

Such incidents taught Bholanath and others not to ask Mataji to cure sick people. They found that to her, life and death were the same. She would say, "Don't ask me to cure anybody. Do you ever pray that somebody should fall ill ? Everybody must work out his own destiny. If obstructions are deliberately placed in his path, the results may be anything but beneficial. I myself have no objection to paying a visit to anybody. Perhaps the dying need this (that is, Mataji's presence) just as much as those who may survive."

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In this connection, an incident may be related proving Mataji's attitude towards physical pain. This happened much later in 1954. "A lady from a distant country", writes Atmananda,* "came last summer to see Mataji in Almora. One of the questions she asked was, since ailments are the results of our actions in this or in former lives, was it advisable to consult doctors and take medicines? Rather was it not more appropriate to bear whatever came to us without interfering with its natural course? Mataji replied that it was *right to do everything in our power* to keep our bodies fit and healthy, for an ailing person could hardly expect to engage in *sādhanā*. All the same, it was certainly necessary to learn how to endure pain, since suffering cannot always be avoided. In such cases, we should accept it as one of the ways in which He manifests Himself.

"Several months later the same lady badly fractured her ankle. This happened in the mountains, miles away from a doctor. To make things worse, heavy rain set in and she had to wait for three days before she could be carried down in a *ḍāṇḍi*. The pain was acute. The lady kept awake all night, but remembering what Mataji had told her, she concentrated on Divine Love in the form of Christ and Mataji. To her own amazement she forgot all about her pain and felt well and refreshed the next morning. She remained in a state of bliss throughout those three days. Later she declared that she would not have missed this experience for anything in the world. Was this what Mataji had meant, when she said, we had to learn to endure suffering when it came?

"After that whenever she felt any pain, the lady tried out to concentrate in a similar manner, but was never able to get

* Ananda-Varta, vol. III, no. 2, p. 151.

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again into that elevated state of mind. On meeting Mataji this year she wanted the cause of her failure explained. 'Your pain was not severe enough', said Mataji with a smile."

Devotees relate many instances of inadequate quantities of food, clothes and flowers just sufficing for the congregation amongst whom they had to be distributed.

Similarly, many instances are heard about calamities having been averted and cherished desires being fulfilled in spite of seemingly impossible conditions. Several volumes may be filled with the narration of these events. It is a favourite topic of conversation with devotees, not merely to harp on the *yogic* powers of Mataji, but also to strengthen each other's faith and participate in the joyful experience of receiving her *kṛpā*.

"The atmosphere of the miraculous", writes Sri Vijayananda (Dr. A. Weintrob), "around Mother has impressed me ever since the very first day that I met her. It is a daily experience in our relationship with the Mother.

"Mother can call down or stop rain at will. When she toured South India in 1952, Madras Province had been suffering from acute scarcity of rain for a prolonged period. I was present when a delegation came and prayed to Mother to bring about rainfall.'

Subsequently, abundant rainfall was reported in the newspapers as due to Mataji's *kṛpā*.

Many who come in contact with her have been impressed by the fact that Mataji is able to answer an unspoken thought or desire.

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A typical personal experience may be recorded here,* "It was in Solon, near Simla, where we had been invited to take part in a *Nāma-yajña*† in the presence of Anandamayi Ma. We went in a batch from Simla on a Saturday and did our best till about 9 o'clock in the night. We felt tired and moved into a room situated at some distance from the temple of Śiva where the ceremony was being held. There we spread ourselves out to rest our aching limbs. It was a dark night and the sky was overcast with clouds. Soon a very heavy downpour followed. We were smoking and talking and our talk naturally centred round Anandamayi Ma. One of our party wanted to convince us that she had supernatural powers. A disbeliever in miracles, I jeered at him and blurted out, 'Better keep your cock-and-bull story to yourself. If your Anandamayi Ma is anywhere near about the position you ascribe to her, let her appear before us here and now, and I shall then believe your stories.' I had hardly finished when we heard a bang from outside. The door, which we had closed to prevent rain-water coming in, fell ajar and, believe it or not, there appeared before us a figure robed in white, thoroughly drenched from head to foot. We were startled by a loud laughter which we knew to be Anandamayi Ma's. Before we could collect our wits, the figure had vanished into darkness! It was still raining cats and dogs, but we did not mind. We sprang to our feet and ran out in the torrential rain to the temple, to be told that Anandamayi Ma had gone out unnoticed and had just returned, thoroughly drenched."

This aspect of Mataji's life has been expressed very clearly by Sri Vijayananda : "Something that has struck me from the very

* The narrater is Late S. Sarkar, J.C.S., who at that time did not know Mataji well.

† A function devoted to singing of *kīrtana* according to the rules and directions laid down in *Chaitanya-Charitakīrtana*, a Vaiṣṇava scripture.

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first day is the atmosphere of the miraculous in which one moves when one is with her. Let me explain : In Europe (and no doubt here also) by the word 'miracle' one conceives of a breaking away from the laws of nature, something that strikes one as impossible, as absurd. But this is only its crude objective side. Its subtle, subjective aspect is quite different. What does it matter to me if a certain *yogī* has walked across the waters or flown through the air ? The real miracle is, when that which one needs, which one desires keenly or feebly, comes at the very moment it is needed. And still better when it comes, not only as one desired it, but as one would have loved to see it in the innermost depth of one's heart.....'Coincidence !' I thought at first. But a coincidence that goes on repeating itself daily cannot be called so anymore. And all this happens without apparently violating the laws of nature — for the Lord has no need to break any laws : He is the Law. Should I give examples ? No, for those who do not know her, will not believe me and those who have lived near her have already understood."*

* Mother as Seen by Her Devotees, 2nd ed., p. 46.

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Chapter Seven

MULTIFARIOUS WAYS OF THE SĀDHAKA

Since the time of the *līlā* of *sādhanā* at Bajitpur, Mataji hardly ever ate a full meal. When she came to Dacca in April 1924 she was taking three mouthfuls of food including water, twice a day. When Didi first met Mataji, she was eating even less. On Mondays and Thursdays she would partake of three mouthfuls, and on the other five days nothing but nine grains of rice. There was no rigid rule for her. She broke it now and then in response to the importunities of members of her family or of devotees. Thus, at the insistence of Pramatha Nath's son, Pratul, she once agreed to take a full meal on the day of the new-moon (*Amāvasyā*). Other devotees quietly turned this into a regular feature at Shahbagh. They would organise a *kīrtana* and everybody would partake of *prasāda*, thus ensuring that Mataji also would have a proper meal.

Bholanath's nephew Amulya took up service at about that time and with his first earnings he arranged a special *pūjā* on a full-moon night. This also was adopted as a permanent practice. Thus, Mataji ate proper meals, twice a month.

At about this time it was noticed that Mataji could not anymore raise her hand to her mouth. Her hand would stop midway, and she would bend her head down to take food from her hand. Sometimes, instead of eating, she would smear earth with the rice. None knew better than Bholanath that all phases in Mataji's life came about naturally and spontaneously. It would be as futile to remonstrate with her as with any other

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onlooker. He took upon himself the duty of feeding her like a child. Didi was pleased to be given the opportunity of rendering this service to Mataji, when she came to stay with them at Shahbagh.

Mataji explained this phase of her life in these words : "Once this body lived on three grains of rice daily for four or five months. Nobody can live for so long a time on such a meagre diet. It looks like a miracle. But it has been so with this body. It has been so, because it can be so. The reason for this is that what we eat is not at all necessary for us. The body takes in only the quintessence of the food, the rest is thrown out. As a result of *sādhanā* the body becomes so constituted that, though no food is taken physically, it can imbibe from the surroundings whatever is necessary for its maintenance. In three ways the body can be maintained without food : one way has just been referred to, namely, the body can take from the environments the nourishment necessary for its maintenance. Secondly, one can live on air alone. For I have just said that in everything there are all other things, so that the properties of other things are in the air in some measure. Therefore, by taking in air alone we get the essence of other things. Again, it may so happen that the body is not taking anything at all, yet it is being maintained unimpaired as in a state of *samādhi*. Thus you find that as a consequence of *sādhanā* it is quite possible to live without what we call food."*

"At one time I had the *kheyāl* that I was one with everything. At that stage I would give food tor whomsoever and whatsoever was in front of me. Sometimes I even smeared earth with rice and vegetables. When Bholanath saw me doing this, he removed

* From the article by Sri A. K. Dattagupta in 'Mother as Seen by Her Devotees', 2nd ed., 1967, pp. 117-118.

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the food in front of me and fed me like a child that had not learnt to use its fingers for eating."

Mataji abstained not only from eating food but also from drinking on two occasions — once for thirteen days and the second time for twentythree days. During this interval she did not even rinse her mouth with water. On the 24th day she asked for a sip of water saying, "I wanted to see what it would be like without drinking but the very necessity for water is becoming extinct. This will not do. As a matter of convention, a semblance of normal behaviour must be kept up."

For sometime Mataji followed the rule of eating only the fruits found under trees in Shahbagh. Now the fruit trees in Shabagh were mainly mango and *leechi*. It was not the season for either, so Mataji lived on practically nothing. She would sometimes take fruits if brought by somebody of his own accord. But her companions were strictly forbidden to make any arrangements for procuring fruit. On the other hand, if fruits were plentiful one day, she would not allow them to be stored for the next day.*

It almost seemed that Mataji did not require a normal meal, but just wanted to keep up the habit of partaking of something or other. This must have been the reason for her taking, for some days, at Shahbagh whatever a person could give her in one gulp including water. Probably, even this quantity was not small enough, so she qualified her rule by saying that she would eat whatever could be given in one gulp and held with three fingers, namely the middle, the fourth and the thumb.

* This rule held good for all eatables. Whatever offerings in the nature of food were brought by devotees during the day, had always to be distributed among the people. Absolutely nothing, not even one single fruit, or a piece of ginger, was allowed to be preserved for the next occasion.

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At one time she did not eat any cereals for about six months. Then, one day she came and sat with Bholanath when he was taking his mid-day meal of rice and vegetables. She asked Matori Pisima to fetch all the rice that had been cooked. Mataji, on that occasion, had a meal which would have sufficed for seven or eight people.

There were other instances of consuming enormous quantities of food.

During the Chirstmas holidays of 1925, one of Bholanath's sisters, Mokshada Devi (wife of Sri Kali Prasanna Kushari of Salkia, Howrah), had come to stay with them. She was very fond of Mataji and treated her like a younger sister. She felt greatly concerned to see that Mataji was eating next to nothing. She planned to cook *kheer* (thickend and sweetened milk with rice boiled in it) from 40 lbs. (1/2 maund) of milk because there were always guests at Shahbagh. She depended upon Bholanath to persuade Mataji to partake of a little of this. Although, as a rule, Bholanath did not interfere with Mataji's ways, he could not say 'no' to his sister. He asked Mataji to have some of the *kheer* that day. So Mataji sat down to her meal. After finishing her first helping, she asked for more. Highly pleased, her sister-in-law hurriedly brought a larger second helping. Mataji got through this very speedily and would pause till she had eaten up the entire quantity that had been prepared. In the meantime, fresh milk had been put on the fire. But it takes a long time for milk to thicken. Like a hungry child, Mataji was quite inconsolable till the yet only half-cooked and boiling hot *kheer* was brought to her. The women fanned the *kheer* to cool it. By the time Mataji had finished this, everybody was thoroughly alarmed. Mokshada Devi, who was a very devout lady, scraped a little

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of the *kheer* from the bottom of the serving dish, and pronouncing a *mantra*, placed it on Mataji's head. Mataji immediately stopped eating and everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

Didi relates that once a devotee, seeing Mataji's lack of interest in food, implored her to take a full meal. Acceding to his request, she sat down to eat. Didi was feeding her. Mataji seemed to be swallowing the food at double the normal rate. She impatiently remarked, "You are not quick enough. Call someone to help you". But even two people could not keep pace with her that day. The devotee, now quite frightened at the unexpected result of his request, with folded hands implored her to desist from eating. Mataji said plaintively, "First you ask me to eat, but no sooner do I start, than you tell me to stop. Now, what am I to do ?"

Didi relates that while eating, Mataji did not seem to pay attention to the food in front of her. She recalls, "Once when I did not know Mataji so well, I thought I would take advantage of this absent-mindedness and feed her as much as possible. In my enthusiasm I fed her more than a normally big meal and yet Mataji did not object. Finally, I was obliged to stop of my own accord. Mataji seemed to awaken from a dream and said, 'Why, have you finished ?"

If not watched carefully and told not to do so, Mataji would swallow the pips and peels of fruit. If one expostulated with her, she would say in surprised tone, "You asked me to take the food, so I did. You did not tell me what I had to choose and reject also".

As in everything else, Mataji remains unchanged in this pattern of behaviour. A few years ago in Dehra Dun, a

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gentleman brought *kheer* for Mataji, prepared with much loving care. He then asked to be allowed to feed her himself. He was an addict to *pān* (betel leaves) and also very fond of talking. After Mataji had finished, she asked him smilingly, "*Pitājī*, have you put saffron in this ?" The gentleman answered in the negative and following Mataji's gaze glanced at the left-over *kheer* in his hand. How great was his embarrassment and remorse when he saw the white surface coated with red dots !

Another incident may be cited here which was related by Mataji, because the person concerned did not know about it. At that time Mataji was moving about in the hills of the Himalayas. Her only companions were Bholanath and Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai, more commonly referred to as *Bhāijī* (brother). Bhaiji used to go to neighbouring villages once a day and beg for food in the manner of a *sannyāsī*. He would bring back whatever he could get, mostly *āṭā* (wheat flour) and cook for her. They had no cooking utensils. Bhaiji would, therefore, choose a rock near a stream, clean it with the flowing water and knead the dough on it. Then he would light a fire, built up with dry sticks and twigs and somehow bake the *chapātīs* on it. Mataji relates : "One day, when Jyotish lit the fire I saw that particles of refuse matter* still adhered to the minute crevices of the rock. When the rock had been washed and was wet, it looked clean enough, but the heat had made the dirt visible. I saw that Jyotish had not noticed anything and that the dirt was getting kneaded up in the dough."

On hearing this story, the very first horrified question was, "But why did you not tell him ?" Mataji answered calmly, "Why

* The hill people of India have no lavatories. Rocks and streams suffice for them.

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should I ? It was all the same to me, and Jyotish in any case was doing his best."

A few years ago at Raipur, after she had finished her meal one day, she asked the person who had fed her, to taste a little of the *kheer* she had been given. Accordingly, the girl took a mouthful of the *kheer,* but it was so hot that she could neither swallow it nor retain it in her mouth. In spite of Mataji's presence she had to spit it out. Mataji smilingly opened her mouth and showed her the scaled red patches in her throat. Mataji suffered from this sore for months.

Didi has always maintained that it is easier for people to worship Mataji than to render her personal service. She makes no demands, shows no preferences and accepts everything, or the lack of it, with the same calmness. Mataji's tranquillity remains unperturbed under severe provocations. Not only so, but she has, more often than not, to console and relieve the mortification of the devotee concerned. This graciousness is unwavering and all inclusive. The stranger may think that the persons surrounding her are intimate with her. That is not really so. It is a fact that she is as close or as distant with a stranger as with a constant companion. Mataji herself has emphasized this point many times. She at times relates the following story to illustrate what she means : "A large lotus was growing in a pond. A wanderer passed by who had never before seen a flower of this kind. Struck by its beauty, he stopped to admire it. He noticed a frog and a fish just below the lotus. 'What is this wonderful flower right above you ?' he asked the frog. The frog's answer was : 'Well, why this question ? It is just a common thing !' and it turned away to hunt for insects. Disappointed, the man addressed the fish who replied, 'Did you not hear what my friend the frog said ? It's just a common plant of the pond !' At that

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moment the wayfarer saw a bee flying swiftly towards the lotus. He wanted to address it, but the bee would not stop for him. It alighted on the blossom and drank deeply of the honey in it. Then it flew back to the man and said, 'What did you want to ask me? Speak now.' The man repeated his question. 'Don't you know', said the bee joyfully, 'this is a lotus full of marvellous honey. I am replete with it and am a transformed being now.'

"It is quite possible to live for a long time in the close proximity of *Sādhus* and *Mahātmās*, sages and saints, without being able to recognize their true quality. Whereas, one who has the *adhikāra* may come from a great distance and within a minute know the Great and Holy for what they are — it depends on one's capacity to penetrate to the essence of things."

Mataji was at Solon (Simla Hills) during the summer of 1946. The revered Haribabaji Maharaj of Vrindavan and Swami Sharananandaji were also staying at Solon at that time. Haribabaji would read a book in the *satsang* and there would be discussion on it afterwards. He read about the early life of Mataji for some days. Mataji in answer to questions touched on some phases of her life described in the previous chapters. "After the *līlā* of initiation," she said, "for five months, there was hardly any time for me to take food. My body was like an automation. I went through the motions of my daily routine of housework like a machine. I would light the fire not thinking about what I could want it for — then like an onlooker I would go through the actions of cooking and serving."

In a different context, she explained this phenomenon in these words: "Lack of food did not have any adverse effect on my body. As a matter of fact, at that time the necessity for food itself vanished." Mataji laughed and said. "You are told that

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people have to abstain from the pleasures of life, but in this case everything was the other way round — I saw that I had to partake of food — sometimes less than a mouthful, so that I did not get the *kheyāl* of doing without it altogether.

"Sometimes this body would be affected by the reading of religious books, just as it used to be by the strains of devotional music. Then again, there was a time when the words of the book were not important at all — it would appear to be of little significance — whatever had to be known was already there. After this came a time when it was realized that everything is that only. Just like sparks of fire, where each itself has all the characteristics of the whole.

"The variety of experience, at the time of *sādhanā,* can hardly be enumerated exhaustively. A time comes when everything becomes clear to the vision, for example, you light a lamp — the house, trees, bushes, people around you — everything becomes visible at the same time. There may be another way of looking at things, namely, what is there to visualize ? After all, there is nothing which is to be known further — whatever is, is always so."

An idea of this comprehensive vision may be formed by anyone who takes an interest in Mataji's ways of dealing with people.

Some years ago, in a general *satsang*, Mataji was answering questions put to her by various members of the congregation. People who were familiar with the general trend of her answers to typical questions, were surprised to notice that she was branching off into new channels and using unusual phrases and terminology. The difference was not so much in the quality of her answers, as in the way of expressing them. So much so that people, at a

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loss to follow her thoughts, desisted, thinking that she must be in one of her cryptic and unfathomable moods. Mataji, on her part, went on elaborating her points, giving a wealth of detail. At the end of the meeting two men came forward and bowed down to her saying that they were Buddhist *bhikṣus* who had come for her *darśana* from afar. They were specially gratified to find her elaborating on the very problem which had been exercising their minds for long. They went away, convinced that Mataji had an extensive knowledge of the Buddhist Scriptures, for she seemed to know the minutest details of their faith.

Once a *haṭhayogī* came to see Mataji. She asked him numerous questions regarding his way of life. Thus encouraged, he related the story of his life to her. He and a few friends had started to practise *yoga* at an early age. By and by they had become so filled with enthusiasm that they had renounced the world in order to devote themselves fully to this way of *sādhanā*. They were determined to attain the goal of self-realization, but it did not seem to have worked out that way. Although to the best of their knowledge they had done nothing but what seemed right, they had met with disastrous results. One had died young and two had fallen victims to incurable ailments. He himself was suffering from severe stomach trouble. After 22 years of *sādhanā* they did not feel that they had attained anything, rather were they feeling disillusioned and frustrated. He was weary of the whole thing and thought that it was merely the habit that was holding him to the path of renunciation.

Although he did not ask for a private audience, Mataji called him aside and talked to him for more than an hour. At the end of the interview, the air of desolation seemed lifted from his face. He said that he had received inspiration

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to continue on his chosen path. On being asked, Mataji said that she had questioned him in detail about his practices, pointed out where he had gone wrong, and told him how to proceed in the right manner.

Quite recently a youg girl from a foreign country asked Mataji for initiation. On being told that Mataji does not herself directly initiate anybody, she asked, "What *japa* can I do ?" Mataji asked her, "Are you a Christian ? Do you believe in Christ ?"

"Yes".

"Meditate on the form of Christ surrounded by heavenly radiance, and wait His guidance.

"What can I do to rid myself of this fear I have ?"

"Fear of what ?"

"I don't know. Just a terrible fear."

"Do this : Meditate on God. Fill yourself with the presence of God so that there is no place for fear. Think to yourself that God is with you and that there can be no place for fear at all."

From these random instances it can be seen that Mataji's aim is to enkindle hunger for the Divine in man. All methods conducive to this aim are acceptable to her. She does not encourage any talk which is not concerned with religious endeavour. Gently but invariably she will guide a conversation back to considerations about a life of *sādhanā*.

All this knowledge about her personality was acquired by her companions gradually by a method of trial and error. At that time in Shahbagh they were far too overwhelmed by the extraordinariness of the entire experience. The impact of

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Mataji's personality was too new to be put in any sort of proper perspective. They could hardly believe in their good fortune and there was always a fear in their minds that Mataji would not be with them for long. After a state of *bhāva* or *samādhi*, they would try their utmost to recall Mataji to her surroundings. They spoke to her about everyday affairs, sought to engage her attention in daily problems, and in other ways endeavoured to dispel her moods of exaltation. It was like trying to restrain a powerful motion with cobwebs. Mataji herself had the *kheyāl* to be where she was and, therefore, these attemps were outwardly successful. Mataji at that time had no need to eat, drink, sleep or cater to any other needs of the body, but she kept up a semblance of normal behaviour, or rather a shadow of it, because it was her *kheyāl* to be with the people.

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Chapter Eight

VĀSANTĪ-PŪJĀ AT SIDDHESHWARI

In April 1925, Mataji suggested to Bholanath that a covering should be constructed over the *vedī* (platform) at Siddheshwari. Shashanka Mohan offered to get this done. Mataji said, "It is all the same. Either you or Bholanath may arrange for it. But try to get it completed within seven days." Shashanka Mohan purchased a little land in Siddheshwari, including the site of the platform, and constructed a mud-walled hut around it. An unexpected hitch occurred when the workmen unaccountably felt hesitant to demolish an ant-hill within that plot of ground. At Mataji's word, Bholanath went and broke up the ant-hill for them. The platform was left as it was, so that when the plinth of the room was constructed it became a hollow square in the floor of the room.

On the seventh day, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by many devotees, went to Siddheshwari and the night was spent in singing *kīrtana*. Mataji sat on the platform, that is to say, inside the hollow. Sometimes she would manage to lie in it also. People who have seen her do so have felt that unless she exercised some *yogic* power, it was not physically possible for her to curl up in the cofined space as she did.

After a few days, the devotee heard that Mataji had suggested that *Vāsantī-pūjā* might be performed at Siddheshwari. The devotees took up the proposal joyfully and preparations went on vigorously. Many friends and relations came to Shahbagh

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to join in this festival. Didima and Dadamasai were already at Shahbagh. Amongst others Bholanath's eldest brother-in-law, Sri Sitanath Kushari, along with his family and Mataji's eldest sister-in-law Pramoda and her family, arrived for the occasion. Bholanath's other elder brother, Surendra Mohan and his wife, lived in Dacca and had already become frequent visitors at Shahbagh. Mataji treated this sister-in-law with as much respect as she had shown to Pramoda before. Bholanath's family priest came from Vikrampur to perform the *pūjā*. Prof. Atal Bihari Bhattacharya arrived from Rajshahi.

Jogesh Banerji was entrusted with the task of providing food for the large party. One day, before the opening day of the *pūjā*, they all came to Siddheshwari. Now the place was not as lonely or desolate as when Mataji had first visited it. The road was more negotiable. Some houses had been built near about the temple. Many of those who lived in them were devoted to Mataji. It was arranged that the women would stay in one of these houses, and the men on the open *verandah* of the Kālī temple. The temple was in good repair now.

Mataji said that *prasāda* should be distributed to all who came, but *bhoga* would be cooked once only. That is, *bhoga* would be prepared in accordance with the *pūjā* rules and no meals cooked separately for the people. Since nobody felt competent to make an estimate of the amount of cereals to be required everyday, Mataji herself came in the morning and decided on the quantities to be cooked. The cooking of the *bhoga* was entrusted to Bholanath's sisters and their daughters-in-law. Chintaharan was in charge of the store-room. Everybody was busy arranging and preparing for the *pūjā* in some capacity or other.

As the *pūjā* started, Mataji took her seat in the hollow

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which was very near the *āsana* of the priest. She sat there the whole of the first day. In the evening, the sky clouded over and strong gusts of wind presaged a violent storm. Bholanath and others felt afraid that some harm might come to the Image since the hut had a thatched roof only. He quickly came to Mataji and said, "You must see that nothing happens to the *Pratimā* (Image)."

Within a few minutes a tempest raged round the small building. The kitchen shed was blown off. All the people gathered together in the *pūjā*-room, dreading its collapse at any moment. Mataji seemed to find the inclement weather quite exhilarating. Her demeanour underwent a swift change, and she seemed to have become one with the very spirit of the storm. She got up from her seat in the hollow swaying to the rhythm of the raging hurricane outside. Pramoda's daughter Labanya had never seen her aunt like this before. "What has happened to *Kākimā* (aunty)", she cried and rushed forward, putting both arms round Mataji. She fell away almost at once and in the crowd thereafter nobody noticed her. By this time people had begun to sing *kīrtana*. Mataji stepped right out into the lashing rain. Followed by the *kīrtana* party, she first visited the Kālī temple and from there went to the house where the women devotees were staying. Gradually the strains of the *kīrtana* rose above the howling storm, and then as suddenly as it had arisen, the gale subsided. The people dispersed to change into dry clothes and repair minor damages.

Shashanka Mohan returned to the *pūjā*-room alone and was astonished to hear a clear and beautiful voice repeating the name of the Lord in the manner of a *kīrtana* '*Haribol, Haribol*'. The utter beauty of this sound held him spellbound for some moments. As he could see no one, he almost believed that it

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was an ethereal voice. Then, following the direction of the sound, he found young Labanya lying on the ground in a pool of mud and water. She was so covered with mud as to be almost indistinguishable from the ground. When he picked her up, she seemed quite oblivious of her surroundings. There was an ecstatic expression on her face. She went on repeating the Name of the Lord in that enthralling tone and voice. She was taken home to her mother, bathed and made to put on dry clothes. But there was no change in her manner. She seemed bewitched by the Name that she uttered. Her mother became very perturbed and alternately scolded her and remonstrated with Mataji to restore Labanya to her normal condition. Labanya was not affected in the least. She smilingly said to Mataji, "Look Aunty, have I gone mad that mother should behave in this manner ? What else is there in this world except this Name ?"

Her mother did not understand anything of this. She kept on insisting that Labanya should be brought back to normalcy. She went on scolding her daughter, "I won't ever let you go to your *Kākimā* if you behave like this."

Mataji then took Labanya with her to another room. Didi also accompanied them. Mataji told Didi that this ecstatic state had come about after Labanya had touched Mataji when she had stood up on the platform at the commencement of the *kīrtana*. She further said, "Look, this state of bliss is coveted by *sādhakas*. She has come by it so naturally, but what can I do ? Her mother is so determined not to allow any of this." Mataji then touched Labanya and seemed to perform certain *kriyās* on her body. Labanya's manner underwent a change temporarily. She would quiten down for sometime and then again revert back to her ecstatic state. Mataji commented, "Do you see ? It is like putting out a large conflagration. You control it at

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one end, yet the fire bursts out with greater vigour at another end."

After some time Labanya came back to her normal condition. She had been in that blissful state of ecstacy for three days. All those who saw her, wondered and marvelled at it. Mataji had told Didi to remain near her and check her if she showed signs of reverting to the supra-normal state. Once Labanya said to Didi, "See, the Image looks just like *Kākimā*." Didi answered, "What nonsense! The Image has ten arms. Does your *Kākimā* have ten arms?" Labanya replied with simple conviction, "Yes indeed, but she does not reveal herself to everybody and that is why people do not see her as she is."*

On *Mahāṣṭamī* day a crowd of people arrived late in the evening from Dacca to see the Image. Nobody remembered Mataji's injunction that no extra cooking was to be undertaken for visitors. A few pots of rice were quickly put on the fire. Didi said to Mataji, "Some visitors have come, but there is hardly anything left of the *prasāda*." Without turning her face, Mataji answered, "Give them whatever you have. Don't cook anything."

Strangely, it was seen that the left-over *prasāda* not only sufficed for the new arrivals but was also enough for the workers who had not yet eaten, and to spare.

On *Mahāṣṭamī* day one of Bholanath's elder sisters Mokshada Devi, the wife of Sri Kali Prasanna Kushari of Salkia, per-

* Labanya probably had entered the realm of no return, because she died only a few years later. Perhaps she had glimpsed a word which was not compatible with the mundane world she had to live in.

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formed *pūjā* at Mataji's feet with 108 lotus flowers. Evidently she no longer looked upon Mataji as her young sister-in-law.

Thus Bholanath's *Vāsantī-pūjā* came to a successful end. According to custom, the clay Image was immersed in the pond nearby on the fourth day. The entire party then returned to Shahbagh. Mokshada Devi said, "I had not seen my relatives for so many years. After the death of our eldest brother Revati Mohan, we had all become separated. Now *Badhūṭhākurāṇī** is making it possible for us all to meet again and come together as a family."

Bholanath's eldest sister had come with her son Mangal, his wife and a small grand-daughter Maroni. Two of Maroni's brothers had died in childhood when they were about her age. Her mother and grand-mother now appealed to Mataji to keep Maroni with her in the belief that this would give her long life. Bholanath agreed to assume charge of this small child. Maroni stayed on at Shahbagh after her family left for home.

BHĀIJĪ :

All devotees at present fully agree in believing that *Bhāijī* or Sri Jyotish Chandra Rai, came nearest to understanding Mataji's personality. Other people have served Mataji with perhaps equal devotion and as complete a lack of ostentation

* A term of endearment connoting respect as well as affection used for young wives of the house.

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as Bhaiji. But he alone of all the early devotees had to fight many obstacles to come to Mataji, or rather he was tested very severely before he acquired his position of honour among devotees. At his death in 1937, Bholanath and all devotees felt that a bulwark had fallen and they experienced a sense of irreparable loss which has yet to be overcome.

Bhaiji's official designation was Personal Assistant to the Director of Agriculture, Government of Bengal. He was a man of great dignity and very reserved temperament. During his life-time very few people had any inkling of the thoughts passing through his mind. He was a man of few words but always ready to help others.*

In 1908, Bhaiji had been initiated in *Śakti-mantra* by his family *guru*. But he was ever in search of a living personification of this *mantra*. He had roamed all over India, visiting holy places and saints, yet his quest remained unfulfilled till his *darśana* of Mataji. He writes, "Through the kindness of Bholanath I had the good fortune to see Mataji. I was startled to perceive the blending of a great *yogic* state of perfect equanimity and that of a retiring young wife. I also realized that I had come to the end of my search."

After his first meeting with Mataji in 1924, he did not go to Shahbagh for almost a year. He did not doubt that she was all that he spiritually aspired to, but as far as he was concerned her position of a young housewife was an unsurmountable barrier. To him it appeared to be an effective disguise. He would think to himself, "If that is her will, be

* After his death, a book called 'Matri-Darshan' was published posthumously, compiled and edited from his manuscripts by his uncle Sri Ganga Charan Dasgupta, Retired Principal of the Baroda College.

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it so. Evidently she does not want us to approach her now. It will be time for us when she emerges out of her retirement."

Sometimes he would thus debate in his mind. At other times the wish to see Mataji was so strong as to be almost uncontrollable. He tried to concentrate on philosophical works and devoted himself to writing something about the religious way of life. A small book, which he named *'Sādhanā'*, took shape out of his meditations. He sent a copy of it to Mataji. The messenger who had delivered the book came back to say that Mataji had asked to see the author. Thus Bhaiji visited Shahbagh again after a year. By then Mataji's silence had come to an end (probably, December 1925). Mataji and Bholanath came and sat near him. Mataji praised his book. Bhaiji experienced an indescribable sense of joy and security, as if he were a child in the presence of his parents.

Bhaiji wanted his wife to share in his joy as well; so he asked her to go and pay her respects to Mataji. Accordingly, after a few days, his wife took a small diamond ornament, a silver dish of sweets and some flowers to Mataji. The people at Shahbagh were interested to see the silver dish. There was a story about it. Bhaiji's wife was told that since the last month or so, whenever Mataji ate anything, she would not use any metal dishes. Bholanath had said, more in despair rather than in real inquiry, "If you won't use bell metal or brass, will you have your food served on silver ?" Mataji had answered, "Yes, I will, but you must promise not to buy any or to tell anyone about it for the next three months."

This stage lasted for a few days only. It was Mataji's custom to give away whatever was brought for her, after a few days or even immediately. She would distribute amongst the people

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clothes, ornaments, of which she was given quite a good number, and other offerings. Sometimes she would give them back to the person who had brought them, saying, "Now it belongs to me. Please keep it for me."

When Bhaiji started going to Shahbagh regularly, he ran the gauntlet of public criticism and his own family also objected. His elder brother, for whom he had great respect, wrote him a letter, saying, "I do not understand what has come over you. Do you hope to get spiritual guidance from a woman?" Bhaiji felt at a loss as to how to reply to his brother, because he himself was not sure what he hoped to gain from Mataji. He decided once more to control his strong desire to surrender himself at Mataji's feet and took up the study of the philosophical treatise *Yogavāśiṣṭha*.

After a week of his sanctuary in the temple of Reason, a stranger called on him, who turned out to be an old Brahmin gentleman by name of Kalikumar Mukherji. He said to Bhaiji, "I have heard that you are one of the devotees of Mataji. I went to see Niranjan Babu and Shashanka Babu, but they were not at home. Can you tell me what Mataji is like?" Bhaiji was unable to utter a word but looked at his visitor with eyes suddenly brimming over with tears. For a few moments the old man watched him fighting for control over his emotion, and then said quietly, "You need not speak. I have been answered. Please take me to Mataji now, if you will." Later, the old man told him, "My own mother died many years ago. To-day I feel like a child who has found his long-lost mother."*

* While this is a most natural form the expression of love and devotion takes, it is obviously not without its cultural colouring. Indian culture is parent-oriented, and to be more specific, mother-oriented.

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Bhaiji's concentration was so deep that he would often see Mataji while he was at home or even in his office. One day he was pacing up and down the open *verandah* of his house. The world was flooded with moonlight. He suddenly saw Mataji walking beside him like a shadow. He had returned from Shahbagh a while ago. Mataji now appeared dressed differently from when he had seen her last. When he saw her next, she was dressed as seen in his vision. On being asked about this she smiled and said, "I went to see what you were doing." He had similar experiences on other occasions also. Mataji would appear before him and seem to say, "You called, therefore I came."*

Crowds were increasing at Shahbagh continuously. At times, many days would pass before Bhaiji was able to talk to Mataji. One day in a fit of depression he remained in his room instead of going to Shahbagh. Suddenly he saw Mataji's face in front of him, but with an unusual expression of sadness. At the same time he turned round to see Amulya standing with his head on the back of his chair. Amulya said, "Mataji has sent me to fetch you." When Bhaiji reached Shahbagh, Mataji said, "I have been noticing your restlessness. It is all to the good. There can be no tranquillity without restlessness first. Fire must be kindled somehow. It is immaterial whether you do it with clarified butter or sandalwood or even with twigs and straws. Once kindled, it has the power to burn everything."

Bhaiji was by no means a credulous man. So, whenever Mataji appeared to him he would note down the time and verify the accuracy of his vision later on.

* Many other devotees have had similar experiences. Such occurrences are well-known but are too numerous to be included in this volume.

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One day Bhaiji was sitting in meditation outside Mataji's room at Shahbagh. Bhaiji often did this after everybody else had gone away and Mataji herself had retired to her room. At that time Didima was staying with Mataji. Both Mataji and Didima as well as Bholanath were in the same room. Mataji on that day had been lying inert in a state of *samādhi* for many hours. Didima was resting beside her but had stayed awake to keep watch until Mataji came back to her normal condition. Bhaiji could not see any of them from where he was sitting. All of a sudden Bhaiji felt that Mataji had got up. He approached the open door and saw fresh damp footprints as if Mataji had stood there with wet feet. Since he saw her lying as before, he asked Didima if Mataji had got up. Didima said, "No, she had not even moved".

This needed an explanation. The next day Bhaiji asked Mataji about it, saying that he had not heard or read anywhere of such a phenomenon. Mataji answered, "Books cannot enumerate all possibilities because there is no end of them."

One afternoon, when he was working in his office, his assistant Bhupen came and told him, "Mataji wants you to go to Shahbagh just now. I told her that the Director was due back from leave and would take over charge from you, but she asked me to convey the message all the same."

Bhaiji left the files and papers as they were on the table, and went to Shahbagh. Mataji said, "Let us go to Siddheshwari." As soon as Mataji, Bholanath and Bhaiji arrived there, Mataji sat in the hollow, her usual seat. Looking at her radiant countenance, a name came spontaneously to Bhaiji's mind. He turned to Bholanath and said, "We shall call her Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi from now on." Bholanath smilingly agreed to this.

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On their way back Mataji remarked, "You were cheerful enough so far but now you look worried." Bhaiji answered that he was reminded of his office. No doubt, the Director would be amazed at his irresponsible behaviour. But he need not have worried. On his return he found that the Director obviously had not even noticed his absence. Later, Bhaiji asked Mataji, "Why did you send for me like this ?" Mataji answered smilingly, "I wanted to see how far you had progressed in these months. Besides, how else would I have got my name ?"

Bhaiji had a devout Muslim friend, Maulavi Ziauddin Hussain. One evening, Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai* and the Maulavi went to Shahbagh. They found that *kīrtana* was in progress in the hall. They stood outside, watching it. All of a sudden Mataji came out of the room followed by a few of the people. Somebody brought a lantern. Mataji was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. She walked straight to where the three friends were standing in the dark. She lightly touched the Muslim gentleman with her right hand and walked on ahead without pausing. The three friends followed. Mataji went to the small mausoleum of the Arab *fakirs*. To the amazement of the assembled people she started to perform the *namāz*. After a few seconds the Maulavi stepped forward and joined in the prayer. After completing the *namāz*, Mataji returned to the *kīrtana* hall. The Maulavi also entered the hall with her and joined in the *kīrtana* clapping his hands to the rhythm of the music. By a coincidence, the man who was supposed to offer a light and a few *bātāsās* (sugar-puffs) at the grave-side had not come that day. Mataji asked the Maulavi to perform this duty. He was given a plate of sugar-puffs for the purpose. After offering the sweets at the grave, he had a strong desire to give a few to Mataji. When he reached the hall,

* Sri Niranjan Rai, Assistant Commissioner of Income-tax. He was Bhaiji's friend. He and his wife Srimati Vinodini Devi were devoted to Mataji.

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Mataji of her own accord took one of the sweets. At the end of the *kīrtana* he partook of the *prasāda* that was distributed amongst the people. He was a very staunch Muslim. After this incident Bhaiji noticed that many of the Maulavi's ideas about his own religion had undergone a change. He became as devoted to Mataji as any of her Hindu devotees.

In the beginning, when he did not know Mataji so well, Bhaiji felt anxious to see her eat so little. He quietly sent a small quantity of fine flour and *ghee* to Shahbagh and asked Matori Pisima to fry a few *purīs* for Mataji every day. This arrangement had to be kept secret because Mataji did not approve of storing. For a few days she did not seem to notice this sudden appearance of *purīs* at mealtimes. Then, one day, she sent for Bhaiji and asked Matori Pisima to fry *purīs* from all the remaining flour. Nearly seventy were made. When Bhaiji came, she ate up all the *purīs* and then said to him smilingly, "Had there been more I would have finished them all. If I start eating, none of you will be able to provide for me, however rich you may be. I tell you, do not make such arrangements for me."

Bhaiji and his close friend Niranjan Rai went to Shahbagh one day to find that Mataji had just finished drawing some diagrams on the floor with a piece of coal. Bholanath remarked with a smile, "Your mother has been drawing the *Ṣaṭchakras*." Mataji commented, "This afternoon I sat in an *āsana* and measured with my fingers the distance from the centre of the head to the middle of the eye-brows, then to the neck and down to the end of the spine. I have a *kheyāl* that there are centres at these specific spots within the body. From the lowest to the highest they range from gross to refined. I have not drawn these diagrams deliberately, but they have drawn themselves

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as it were. These centres are formations of nerves only. The aptitudes and propensities of the human being, determined by the experiences of his sense organs, are located in these centres. The stream of vitality flows through them slowly or fast, determining the emotions and actions of the individual. Just as the world has different strata, such as earth, water, the void and so on, the human body also has different levels. The vital force lies as if somnolent at the base of the spine. By perseverence and faith thought and action are purified. The vibrations engendered by the action of inner and outer purity shake this sleeping power into motion. When this power moves upwards, penetrating level after level, the *sādhaka* feels freed from many ties." Mataji went on describing the various *chakras*, their inner significance and some of the experiences that may come to a *sādhaka* who treads this path. Bhaiji had read of these things in treatises on *Yogas* and *Tantras*, but he now realized that what Mataji was describing from her own direct experience, was so much more vivid and meaningful than the mere diagramatic representations given in books.

One night Bhaiji was thinking of Mataji's oft-repeated saying, 'The name purifies'. He was doing *japa*, and now began to feel an unutterable joy in this occupation. He would doze off at times, but whenever he woke up he was blissfully aware of the *mantra* going on within him. This continued throughout the next day. He had to make an effort to pay attention to the outside world. At night, he did not feel at all sleepy. He spent long hours sitting motionless, suffused by a joy that overwhelmed him. The next day he told Mataji of his experience. She smiled and said, "You have tasted a fallen drop of honey. Now imagine how sweet the entire honeycomb would be."

Both Bhaiji and his friend Niranjan Rai were men of reserved

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temperament. They did not approve of *kīrtana* very much. One evening, after the *kīrtana* at Shahbagh, they were taken aback to hear Mataji say, "All those who did not join in the *kīrtana* today, must sing now." Bhaiji, Niranjan and a few other culprits, to the amusement of the people present, then very sheepishly sang *kīrtana* for a little while. When everybody had gone away, Bhaiji felt inspired to sit all along during the long hours of the night, singing *kīrtana*. He now understood the ecstacy that people feel when they hear or join in an inspired *kīrtana*. He resolved not to look down upon *kīrtana* as a very inferior mode of *sādhanā*.

Once he was tempted to ask Mataji, "Please tell me who or what are you ?"

Mataji laughed aloud and said, "What a childish question to ask ! People have various visions of gods and goddesses (in me) according to their own conditioning. What I was before, I am now, and shall be hereafter. I am also whatever you or anybody may think I am.....Why don't you look at it this way : That the yearnings (of seekers after Truth) have brought about this body. You all have wanted it and so you have found it. That is all you need to know."

"But this is not a very satisfactory answer..." Before Bhaiji could complete his sentence, Mataji's face took on an effulgent expression which did not belong to this world. With a voice which struck fear in Bhaiji's mind she said, "What more do you want to know, tell me, what more do you want to know ?" Bhaiji's words faltered into silence and he did not have the courage to pursue the topic any further.

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Chapter Nine

BEGINNING OF THE CEASELESS WANDERINGS

Pran Gopal Mukherjee had, after retirement from the post of Deputy Post Master General of Dacca, settled in Deoghar to be near the Ashram of his *Guru*, Sri Balananda Brahmachari Maharaj. He had repeatedly invited Mataji to visit Deoghar.

Sometime in May 1926, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by Shashanka Mohan, Didi, Atal Bihari and his wife, and a few others, set out for Deoghar *via* Calcutta. This was Mataji's first visit to the capital of undivided Bengal. They had been invited to stay with Pramatha Nath, who was now posted in Calcutta. Pramatha Nath was overjoyed at Mataji's *darśana* in his own home. After a couple of days in Calcutta, they went on to Deoghar where Pran Gopal Mukherjee was eagerly awaiting their arrival. The next day he took Mataji to his *Guru's* Ashram. The Brahmachariji said, "I have seen you before in visions. Now you have come to give *darśana* in your concrete form."

The following day Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during the *kīrtana* at the Ashram. She stood upright on her toes with her arms raised and for a long time danced to the rhythm of the *kīrtana*. The Brahmachariji was awe-struck at the scene. After the *kīrtana* the Brahmachariji conversed with her on spiritual matters.

Mataji and her party stayed in Deoghar for a week. Many people came to know her and she was held in great esteem by the inmates of the Ashram.

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An eye-witness account of this visit is given by Prof. N. K. Brahma*: "I had the good fortune of seeing Mother next in the summer of 1926 at Deoghar....She sang in such a sweet and melodious voice that it seemed to all present that she could not be any human being but must be a goddess in human form. Sri Sri Brahmachari Maharaj was very much impressed by Mataji and it was at his special request that she agreed to stay for a week changing her original programme of remaining at Deoghar for three days only.

"I asked Mother what I could do for my spiritual advancement and was told in reply that what I did was all right and that nothing further could be done even if she instructed me to do so. I betrayed signs of doubt. Mother noticed it and said, 'Very well, I am telling you a very simple thing. Do not worship the portrait of a man who is alive'. 'I never do so, why should I' was my answer.. Mother merely smiled and said, 'Very well.'

"After two years and a half I met her in the house of her husband's brother at Calcutta. I remember two or three missionary gentlemen coming to see her that evening and she was busy with them. As soon as I approached her, she said, 'Well, you do not worship the portrait of any living man, do you?' I was bewildered. During the interval of these two years and a half I had got a bromide enlargement of a saint (who was then alive). I kept it in my *pūjā*-room and was worshipping it everyday. She did not wait for an answer and said to me, 'You see, then, that what is ordained to happen, happens; nothing but that'.

On their return to Calcutta, they put up at Surendra Mohan Mukherjee's place. He had not seen Mataji before but had

* Mother As Seen By Her Devotees, pp. 39-40.

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agreed to receive them as guests. After this first *darśana* he and his aged mother became life-long devotees of Mataji.

On the day of her departure from Calcutta, Mataji visited Pramatha Nath's house also. Many people who were to become devotees later on came to see her there. It was arranged that she would go to the station from Pramatha Nath's house. At the time of her departure, Pramatha Nath sat in meditation in a corner of the room. Mataji approached him to bid farewell. Without saying a word he prostrated himself before her and thus prevented her from moving away. Many people had come with food for the journey. There was a heap of fruits, sweets, *śārīs* and flowers at her feet. It started raining heavily. The assembled people standing about in the rain began to sing *kīrtana*.

Strangers became friends. Amidst an air of great rejoicing and festivity a meal for everyone was improvised out of all the available eatables brought for Mataji and her party. Mataji missed the train, much to the joy of her new acquaintances in Calcutta. She returned to Dacca the next day.

Soon after her return from Calcutta, Mataji went one day to Siddheshwari, as she often did, accompanied by a small group of people. She sat in the hollow, surrounded by the others. Mataji looked about her and spoke in a firm voice, "All of you must endeavour to mould yourselves. You must strive to overcome anger and jealousy. This is merely the beginning. You will have to endure much. Storms will arise and sweep away many from amongst you."

Mataji no longer covered her face with the folds of her *śāṛī*. It was left drawn up on her head only. There was no shyness or restraint in her manner now. Once more she spoke in a very

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forceful voice, "Look, people mostly ask me about their worldly problems. I have nothing to say about such matters, but I tell you that when I come and sit in this hollow I shall answer whatever question you choose to ask, but not at any other time."

There was silence for some time. The women took the initiative by asking Mataji about their personal problems pertaining to daily affairs. Mataji smilingly answered these questions and suggested solutions to problems presented to her. Strange as it may seem, nobody had the wit to ask a single question of any significance. After some time, irritated by petty questions, the men started to sing *kīrtana*. Mataji stood up inside the hollow and very strange and awe-inspiring *bhāvas* began to manifest themselves on her body.

Didi knelt in front of Mataji reciting aloud the hymn to Durgā, a demonstration which was entirely foreign to her nature. Many other people also seemed overwhelmed and stood gazing at Mataji with folded hands.

Mataji stepped out of the hollow and walked very rapidly through the surrounding darkness to the Kālī temple. She lay down in front of the image. Bholanath and Didi gently massaged her hands and feet. Mataji said something indistinctly. With great difficulty Didi managed to catch the words by bending her head. Didi turned round and said to the assembled people, "Mataji says that none of you should disclose or discuss whatever you may have seen today." It was almost dawn by the time they came back to Shahbagh.

This incident may be related in the words of one of the eyewitnesses : "Mother sat upon the platform that *Ambuvāchī* day and the change that came over her person was simply astounding.

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Her whole body seemed afire—but it was a fire that emitted the sweetest, the most comfortably cool rays that you could imagine. She shone gloriously but did not cause any pain to our vision. To this day I have a vivid recollection of this transfiguration ..... She called one by one the four or five persons who had then gathered there, except only one. She had, I should say here, not yet 'come out' and very few people had any knowledge about her. I remember Mother called Rai Bahadur (Pran Gopal Mukherjee) first and said in an admonishing tone: 'You are publicising me'. Rai Bahadur smiled and replied: 'Yes Mother, I am'. She then said something to him which I cannot remember. The next person to be called was myself and Mother in a deep toned voice said to me: 'I know but One'. Then she launched into a *stotra* the like of which used to gush forth from her on many an occasion in those days. It was not possible to follow her in it, so rapid was the stream of words welling forth, but it was clearly understood that she was speaking of the unity of all things, and I seem to remember the word *Ābrahmastamba-paryantam* occurring in it. Thus, even at the beginning of my acquaintance with her, Mother spoke of Unity in Diversity—the truth, which has been so forcibly borne upon me by her utterances and conduct subsequently....."*

The one person left out was Atal Bihari Bhattacharya and this became a turning point in his life. He was grief-stricken at this apparent neglect and his yearning for Mataji's grace became overwhelming. Subsequently he and his wife felt amply recompensed by Mataji's care and concern for them.

Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, a professional photographer from Chittagong had come to Dacca during the Pūjā vacation of 1926.

* Girija Shankar Bhattacharya : Mother As Seen by Her Devotees, pp. 104-105.

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He was very anxious to take a few photos of Mataji. One morning, accompanied by Bhaiji he visited Shahbagh. Mataji was lying in one of the rooms in an inert condition of *samādhi*. Shashi Bhushan, who had to leave the same evening, sought Bholanath's permission and help. Bholanath, assisted by Bhaiji, guided Mataji's steps to a sunlit spot outside. Shashi Bhushan exposed 18 plates. When he developed them he was amazed to find that the first 17 were totally blank. The last one showed the sitting figure of Mataji, but there was a shadowy form at her back. In great haste he printed this negative and to his amazement found that the form was that of Bhaiji. Actually, Bhaiji had been standing beyond the range of his focus while he took the photos. There was also a semicircular mark on Mataji's forehead.

Questioned about this phenomenon, Mataji later said, "When Bholanath and Jyotish (Bhaiji) came to take me outside I had the *kheyāl* that my body was surrounded by a very bright light. This may have spoilt the first few plates. This light began to diminish gradually until it remained concentrated on the forehead only. I did not see Jyotish but I had a *kheyāl* that he was standing at my back.

Another similar incident occurred in Dehra Dun much later. The picture of a child was superimposed on the subject of the photograph. But, as written earlier, these phenomena never acquired a prominence over and above the miraculous personality of Mataji. Mataji's *kheyāl* was synonymous with accomplishment. This itself worked as a pervasive law of nature rather than a spectacular departure from the norm. So much so that it was years before Mataji's companions learnt to abide by her *kheyāl*. That this knowledge dawned on them only very slowly was due to the fact that Mataji was always ready to abide by the wishes of the people rather than express her own *kheyāl*. She would ordinarily

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(unless her *kheyāl* was otherwise) concur with the general opinion in matters requiring decisions. She would ask for the opinions of elders round her and would take up their suggestions for execution.

Mataji herself ordinarily never sets about doing anything towards an end. Therefore, devotees consider it a rare honour and a matter of good fortune if she makes any suggestions which can be carried out by them. Incidentally, it may be said that her characteristic of simply abiding by the arrangements made by her companions or accepting the decisions taken by them, leads to strange results just as her unquestioning obedience did in her childhood. An example may be given : Once an air-conditioned coach had been reserved for her in the Bombay Mail. Mataji does not even use an electric fan during summer. The fans in her rooms are used for visitors only. It could be seen that she was extremely uncomfortable in the air-conditioned coach. But she would not allow anybody to make any alternative arrangements because she was going to be the guest of the gentleman who had arranged for the railway journey. She remarked ruefully, "He has done the best that he could. It is not his fault that his mother (meaning herself) is a complete rustic !"

During the same vacation of 1926, many newcomers had Mataji's *darśana* in Dacca, among them was Shashanka Mohan's eldest son Birendra Chandra Mukherjee, Professor of English at Agra. Late at night, when a few close companions only remained at Shahbagh, he and Atal Bihari would engage Mataji in conversation. One day he asked her, "What do you think of all these new people coming to see you almost daily ?"

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"Nobody is new. They all appear familiar to me."

"Do you always know the thoughts of others ?"

"Not all the time. I see clearly the things which are within the focus of my attention. You know the letters of the alphabet, but without keeping them constantly in mind, you can read when you want to. This is one aspect of the matter. Actually, even when knowledge is all comprehensive a mode of behaviour is possible which shows that the person has ordinary comprehension."

"What is the difference between a *sādhaka* and a Divine Incarnation ?"

"A *sādhaka* is restricted by many self-imposed rules and regulations. An incarnation is above such limitations, although he may adhere to them at his will. It is difficult for ordinary people to distinguish between the two. Men of discernment only may know the difference. But it is also true that unless He Himself reveals His identity, nobody can recognise an Incarnation for what He is."

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Chapter Ten

THE KALI OF RAMNA ASHRAM AT DACCA

The annual Kālī-Pūjā drew near (October/November 1926). Kālī was the presiding deity of Bholanath's family, who were expected to perform the annual *pūjā* wherever they might be. Bholanath and his brothers had to move from place to place on account of their various occupations, and it was not always possible for them to get together for this annual festival. The brothers, therefore, decided to perform this duty by turn. Bholanath had once celebrated the *pūjā* while at Bajitpur. After coming to Dacca Mataji had, at the request of Bholanath and others, herself performed the annual *pūjā* in 1925. This was the first time that Mataji had performed a *pūjā* publicly with the assistance of outsiders and in accordance with scriptural rules. On both these occasions some miraculous incidents took place. The devotees were keen to see Mataji do the *pūjā* again. The year was marked by many changes in her life. She had become very widely known and Shahbagh was swarming with more and more people everyday.

Not daring to ask Mataji themselves, the devotees requested Bholanath to plead with her on their behalf. But Mataji said to him, "Do not request me to do these things any more. You can see for yourself that I am unable to do any type of work now." Bholanath did not want to pursuade her against her *kheyāl*, and as it was not his turn to celebrate the *pūjā*, he dropped the idea altogether.

Just one day before the *pūjā*, late at night, Mataji asked Bholanath, "What was Bhudeb Babu talking to you about ?"

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Bholanath told her that he and others had been trying to pursuade Bholanath to arrange for the annual festival. Mataji said, "Why don't you perform the *pūjā* ?" Bholanath interpreted this to mean that Mataji now had the *kheyāl* for this *pūjā* to be celebrated. He went out and gave the good news to Baul, Suren and others who were just about to go home. Since time was so short the image had to be procured that very night and all arrangements expedited. Baul and a few others went to town to fetch the image. They found that all images but one had been sold out. The colour of this image was somewhat unusual being more bluish than black. When Mataji saw the image the next day, she said, "Well, evidently Kālī had decided to come to us this year and so things have arranged themselves in this manner. I saw an image of Kālī of exactly this shape and hue, wearing a garland of red hibiscus flowers coming down from above as if to fall into my arms. The image was so vivid that I lifted my arms to take it. Now that she is here, you should make arrangements for the *pūjā* to the best of your ability."

Perhaps it will not be out of place to give here a few details of these forms of worship. The presiding deity of Bengal is Durgā or Vāsantī, the personification of the Divine Mother. According to scriptural stories, although the daughter of a king, she chose for her husband Siva, the personification of the very spirit of renunciation. To his abode of utter desolation on the snow-clad mount Kailāsa, she brought the magnificence and grandeur of a princely household. For three days every year* she comes to visit the earth, her erstwhile home. Bengal prepares for her advent with hectic enthusiasm. She is worshipped with flowers, fruits, sweets, clothes and music. For three days Bengalis can think of nothing else. Then wiping off the festive mood, as if by magic, the Goddess

* Durgā-Pūjā takes place in either September or October and Vāsantī-Pūjā in April. The former is more commonly celebrated.

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departs to the abode of her Husband, burying the whole countryside under a pall of gloom.

The Divine mother in the form of Durgā or in various other forms is worshipped in all parts of India. This type of worship of Kālī, however, is peculiar to Bengal. According to the Scriptures, Kālī is the destructive aspect of Durgā. Durgā is beautiful to look at, Kālī is fearful. The golden image of Durgā is clothed in shining garbs and the light that flashes from her ornaments fills the universe : Kālī's dark hue mingles with the black waves of her hair cascading down all round her. As Kālī is the reigning deity of the battle-field, she is bespattered with human blood. She has four hands. The left upper hand holds aloft a *kharga**, while the left lower hand grasps a human skull ; whereas the right upper hand carries the message of *abhaya*—'do not fear', while the right lower hand is held out in a gesture of benediction. She is so bent upon her devastating course of the slaughter of evil-doers that she inadvertently steps on the prostrate form of Śiva, and then bites her tongue in confusion at what she has done. It is thus that the artist likes to create her image for the annual *pūjā*. The inspired songs of Ramaprasad invoke an image of beauty and benign presence rather than the apparently repellent form of Kālī. More modern poets of Bengal, such as Atulprasad Sen and Kazi Nazrul Islam, have sung songs of praise about Kālī as the most compassionate Mother. Proper appreciation of the conflicting appeal of Kālī is not possible without some orientation in culture and tradition. Durgā-Pūjā is a festival for the masses. Kālī-Pūjā is for the *sādhaka*. It takes place in the stillness and quiet of midnight.

Bholanath himself was a Sākta and a staunch believer in ritualism. The early devotees of Mataji were all used to this form

* A short broad sword with a curved tip.

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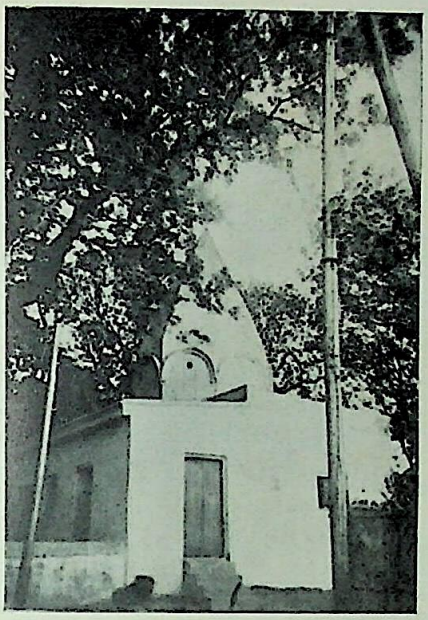
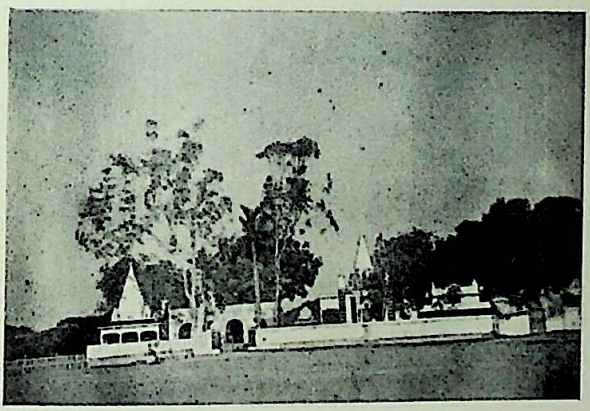


Kali Temple at Siddheshwari



Ramna Ashram, Dacca

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of Kālī-Pūjā since their childhood. Preparations went on in full swing. Shahbagh was crowded with people. Midnight drew near. There was not an inch of space to spare in the *pūjā*-room. Mataji was sitting in her own room in a state of *bhāva*. Bholanath somehow guided her steps to a tank nearby. Didi and others helped her to take a bath and change into a new *śārī*. Bholanath then brought her back to the *pūjā*-room and seated her in front of the image. In the adjoining room people were singing *kīrtana*. The atmosphere was suffused with the fragrance of flowers and incense. The congregation waited with full hearts to see Mataji invoke the presence of the Goddess.

Mataji started performing certain *kriyās* with her left hand. After a few moments she stood up and said sharply to Bholanath, "I shall sit in my place, you can do the *pūjā*". Like a flash of lightning she sped through the crowd and sat down near the image. Bholanath thought that she had asked him to do the *pūjā* because she herself would not do so and that she was going merely to sit with the other ladies. Bholanath had hardly begun to say, "No, no. I told you before, I will not do the *pūjā*....." when he saw a living Kālī in place of Mataji. Mataji's fair complexion had darkened, her eyes became fixed and enlarged like those of the goddess Kālī in her clay image. Bholanath without more ado occupied the seat of the priest and filling his hands with flowers started offering them to Mataji reciting *mantras* of the Devī-Pūjā. The next instant Mataji bent forward, so that the entire upper part of her body was flat on the floor. This limp pliable posture was peculiar to Mataji. Without raising herself she said, "Close your eyes." Everybody obeyed. But Mataji again said, without changing her posture, "Mahadeiya has not closed her eyes." Then on looking around, people found that Mahadeiya, the wife of one of the gardeners, was standing under a tree outside and looking into the room. On being told, she also shut her eyes.

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All this happened within a few seconds. The people sat in silent meditation in an atmosphere which had become surcharged for them. After some time Bholanath asked them to open their eyes. Mataji was sitting up, covered with flowers of different colours. The ineffable beauty and majesty of her countenance filled every heart with awe, wonder and homage.

Bholanath had sensed during the *pūjā* of the previous year that Mataji was not in favour of offering any animal for sacrifice. So, an alternative form of worship was devised and performed. The last ritual of the *pūjā* is supposed to be the *yajña* (kindling of sacrificial fire) followed by *pūrṇāhuti* (final oblation). But on this occasion *pūrṇāhuti* was withheld at Mataji's instance. The *pūjā* was concluded, but the fire was not extinguished.

The people assembled took their share of the *prasāda* and went home talking to each other of their own impressions of a unique experience.

In the early hours of the morning, a few close companions sat with Mataji and Bholanath discussing the Kālī-Pūjā just completed. Somebody remarked that the image was lifelike and that he would be quite afraid to sit alone in the *pūjā*-room at night. The others concurred that the image was extraordinary. Suddenly Mataji asked Didi to fetch a little of the fire from the bronze receptacle *(yajña-kuṇḍa)* in the *pūjā*-room. Didi put a few pieces of live coal in a vessel and brought it to Mataji. Mataji took it in her hand and shaking it playfully remarked, "The fire of a *Mahāyajña* will be lighted from this fire."* After a short

* A chain of fortuitous circumstances led to the performing of a *Mahāyajña* at Varanasi from 14th January 1946 to 14th January 1949. Arrangements for kindling the fire were made according to strict Vedic rules. The priest-in-charge of the proceedings was not a devotee of Mataji. But at the last moment (again due to unforeseen circumstances) he had to take the help

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pause she spoke again, "Who can undertake to maintain this fire in Kālī's room ?" Nobody said anything immediately because the question was fraught with difficulties. The daily worship of Kālī is meant for ascetics only as she is supposed to destroy all bondage. Some people are even afraid to keep a picture of Kālī in their homes. Maintaining the fire would entail the offering of daily oblations for its worship and constant vigilance. In short, these things could not be done by a man leading a householder's life. So expressing the general opinion about it, Didi's brother Birendra Chandra answered, "No, Ma, I cannot. I have my wife and children to look after." The others merely kept quiet. But Mataji repeated again, "Who amongst you can do it ?" Now, Shashanka Mohan had been dozing a little. He heard the question now and believed it to be in connection with the previous topic of conversation, namely, about being afraid of the lifelike image of Kālī. He said emphatically, "I can. What is there to be afraid of ?"

Mataji promptly replied, "Very well. Ask the permission of your sons." Birendra, his eldest, and Nandu, his youngest sons were present. Birendra said, "If father can do it, it will be highly meritorious for us all." Nandu had some grave objections but did not speak. Mataji then entrusted Shashanka Mohan with the maintenance of the fire which was destined to have a momentous future. Without another word he went away to begin a vigil which is still being kept up in several places. Mataji asked Didi and her brothers to go home.

The general custom after a *pūjā* is to consign the image

of this fire which had been burning for twenty years at that time. Thus, Mataji's words were fulfilled although personally she did nothing towards this end.

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to the waters of a river. Some rituals are performed by ladies before the image is taken away. The next day Niranjan Rai's wife Vinodini Devi, said, "Ma, the image is really extraordinary. It is a great pity to send it away for immersion." Mataji said, "Let her remain if you are feeling so sad about it. We did not ask the goddess to come. She came of her own accord. Let her remain as long as she wills."

A young boy called Kamalakanta who had just passed his matriculation examination had come to Shahbagh. He had fallen ill some time ago and was cured. He attributed the recovery to Mataji's grace. After his recovery, he would not return to his village home but stayed on at Shahbagh. Mataji assigned to him the duty of looking after the image of Kālī. There would be no *pūjā*, but he was told to garland her every day without fail with a *mālā* (wreath) of red hibiscus flowers.

One day Mataji asked some of the men to remove the image of Kālī to another room of the house. With great care the clay image was shifted to the new place. A storm arose that night and the door of the original *pūjā*-room crashed down on the very spot where the image had been located. It would have been smashed to pieces had it not been removed in time.

The visitors to Shahbagh got into the habit of paying homage to Kālī. Two of them dreamt of her also and wished to perform *pūjā*. Accordingly, arrangements were made for worship. At that time animal sacrifice to Kālī was a common practice. Bholanath had, as already mentioned, sensed that Mataji's *kheyāl* was against this feature of the *pūjā* and so he had dropped it from all the *pūjās* organised by him. But this particular *pūjā* was being performed by outsiders and so provision for the sacrifice of a goat was included.

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Mataji was lying in a state of *bhāva* while the *pūjā* was being performed. She suddenly appeared at the time of the sacrifice and placed her hand on the neck of the animal. Bholanath immediately had the goat released from the sacrificial post.

Mataji asked Ashutosh, a young boy, to pick up the goat in his arms and follow her. She came to a tank outside Shahbagh and told Ashutosh to release the animal. Many persons had followed them with lanterns in their hands. When they started walking back to Shahbagh the kid also followed Mataji. When she came and sat near the *pūjā*, it lay down near her.

The *pūjā* was completed. The devotees partook of *prasāda* and dispersed. In this way, Mataji brought about a major change in the ritualistic worship of deities. The practice of animal sacrifice was thereafter discontinued effectively.

The goat remained at Shahbagh. It would either be under Mataji's wooden bedstead or would sit with its head on her lap during *kīrtanas*. It gradually became very big and robust. One day, when Mataji was not at Shahbagh, it jumped over the wall and disappeard.

The subsequent history of the goddess Kālī is as interesting as her advent at Shahbagh. The image had to be moved five times before it could be installed permanently. Images for annual festivals are made of ordinary clay and not processed for durability. Whenever the devotees were obliged to move the image, they would be apprehensive about its safety, but nothing untoward happened. In spite of so much handling, the image remained intact. An anecdote relating to this goddess Kālī will perhaps not be out of place here. Sometime after the Kālī-Pūjā described above, Mataji happened to be travelling in Uttar Pradesh near

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Mirzapur. Bhaiji was also there. Leaving him at Mirzapur, Mataji and Bholanath went on to Rajasthan. Bhaiji came to the station to see them off. Mataji told him, "On your way back, look for a garland of hibiscus flowers on the hillside of Chunar (a village nearby) and keep it with you."

Chunar is situated in an arid hilly region where a type of thorny bush is the only vegetation. There are absolutely no hibiscus shrubs for miles around.

On his way back from the station, Bhaiji kept a sceptical look out for a garland of flowers. At last he saw the garland quiet easily and clearly. It was a bright red spot visible from afar against a uniform drab background. The flowers were fresh and glowing.

Bhaiji wrote to the devotees in Dacca to enquire if anything unusual had happened on that particular day. He heard by return of post that Kamalakanta had forgotten to garland the image of Kālī that day, and that they were all remorseful for the omission. Bhaiji now saw a meaning in this incident. He realized that Mataji's *kheyāl* of the daily offering of a garland had been fulfilled in spite of Kamalakanta's forgetfulness.

Incidentally, another interesting event may be related here. In 1931, an Ashram was built for Mataji by the devotees of Dacca, near the Ramna polo-grounds. More particulars about this Ashram will appear later. At Mataji's suggestion the image of Kālī was installed in a small temple in the Ashram. A few months after the ceremony of installation, Mataji happened to be in Cox's Bazar, a coastal town in the district Chittagong.

On a new moon day Mataji, while walking back from

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the house of a neighbour along the beach, suddenly started twisting one arm with the other. There was a smile on her lips but her eyes were full of tears. The whole night she did not rest and would twist her arm at intervals. Didi felt quite desperate, not knowing what to do. The next morning also, Mataji's eyes would fill with tears, although her expression remained normal. After a few days, a letter from Bhaiji conveyed the astounding news that thieves had broken into the Kālī temple at Ramna, on new moon night, and had removed the gold ornaments from the deity, damaging one of the arms of the image in the process.

This created a problem because a damaged image cannot be worshipped but has to be immersed in water. Mataji asked Bhaiji to write to the *paṇḍits* at Varanasi to find out what according to *Śāstric* rules could be done about the damaged image. Mahamahopadhyaya Ananda Tarkachudamani wrote back to say : "This image, I see, has been preserved for daily worship, although intended for the annual *pūjā* only *(Naimittika Pūjā)*. This arrangement was made by a person of great spirituality *(Mahāpuruṣa)*. In such a case, ordinary custom may be set aside and such arrangement be made as is directed by the *Mahāpuruṣa*."

Mataji was approached for guidance. She said, "Since an arm has been broken, let it be repaired. An accident of this kind would not prove fatal to a living person. If a beloved person meets with an accident, we don't throw him away. So why should we throw the image away ? It would be different if it had been damaged seriously." So it was decided by the devotees that they would await Mataji's arrival in Dacca for further instructions in the matter.

Later, when Mataji returned to Dacca, the image of Kālī was

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repaired and installed in its original place. The devotees were planning to build a bigger temple to house the images of Annapūrṇā, Śiva and Viṣhṇu. Under Mataji's guidance a new temple was constructed around the small shrine of Kālī. The Kālī temple was left undisturbed. The foundation was laid around it and the temple was constructed, leaving some space between the original shrine and the new walls. The floor of the new room came upto more than half of the Kālī shrine, which resembled an underground cell inside the room. A door and a flight of steps led down to this inner sanctum. The deities—Śiva, Annapūrṇā, Kālī and Viṣhṇu—were installed on the roof of this original shrine which was now like a platform in the new temple.

Mataji made new rules about the worship of Kālī. The door giving access to the Kālī temple would remain locked. It would be opened once every year and *pūjā* performed before the image. The following day the door would remain open for all devotees irrespective of caste, creed and religion. In the evening, after *abhiṣeka* and worship, the door would be locked again for one year. A photograph of Kālī was taken and hung over the temple door. Instead of the image, this photograph was decorated daily with a garland of red hibiscus flowers. Jogeshdada was put in charge of all these arrangements.

Something must be said here about Jogeshdada. Shri Jogesh Rai was a bachelor working in Dacca before joining the Ashram. He used to visit Shahbagh, attracted by the music rather than the religious activities. One day, during a *kīrtana* Mataji touched him while she was in an exalted state of *bhāva*. Shri Jogesh Rai was a quiet type of man. He would remain unobtrusively at the fringe of the crowd of devotees. Mataji at that time did not speak very freely to people visiting Shahbagh. Yet this did

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not prevent her from conveying her *kheyāl* to Jogeshdada, as he is called now.

Mataji asked Bhalanath to tell Jogeshdada to take one year's leave from his service. Then he was to leave Dacca and go on a pilgrimage to distant places where nobody would know him. For one year he was not to make himself known to anybody. He was to inform his mother only, before leaving.

The friends and family of Jogesh Rai were surprised to learn of his sudden and unaccountable departure from Dacca.

Jogeshdada had no money, so he was obliged to beg for food. He did not know how to do this. He would stand near a house and repeat the names of the Lord. Mostly, people did not heed him. He did not look like a beggar or a *sādhu*, so this was also a handicap. Jogeshdada says that it became slightly easier for him when he grew a beard and matted hair and his clothes became shabby. He met Mataji unexpectedly in Hardwar during this year of pilgrimage. He was surprised to see Mataji and her party of people walking along the road. Nobody recognised him because he was greatly changed in appearance. He looked like one of the *sādhus* to be met with so frequently in that part of the country. Since he was not supposed to make himself known he did not approach them. He was not sure whether Mataji had noticed him or recognised him. He stood and watched the whole party walk past and go on ahead. After a short distance the road had a sharp turn. When Mataji passed this turning, she looked back at him standing by the wayside, and he knew from her expression that she had recognised him.

After completing one year Jogeshdada returned to Dacca. Mataji asked him to resume his service saying, "This is enough

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"for the time being." Off and on Mataji would entrust him with various duties. By 1931, he was staying at Ramna as an inmate of the Ashram.

The new arrangements for the Goddess Kālī were carried out for about seven years. The devotees of Dacca would gather in the Ashram for the opening of the door once a year. Incidentally, it may be noted that Mataji had the *kheyāl* that everybody irrespective of caste and creed could enter the temple and have Kālī's *darśana*. For one day there was no restriction for anyone.

The annual *darśana* of Kālī came to an end in 1938. The intervening years had brought about many changes in Mataji's way of life. In 1938, Bholanath passed away, much to the grief of all devotees. Didi and her father came to Dacca to attend the *pūjā* celebrations on Mataji's birthday. Mataji herself was away in Dehra Dun. On the specified day the door of Kālī's room was opened. The devotees were filled with sadness to see that one of the arms of the image had fallen from the body. It will be remembered that this had happened once before. Under Mataji's guidance the arm had been repaired. Bholanath had performed the *abhiṣeka* and *pūjā* of the deity and had reinstalled it in the shrine. Now Kulada Babu, who was in charge, did not feel equal in performing what Bholanath had done. He was afraid to touch or perform the *pūjā* of the broken image. He decided to leave it alone and performed the ceremony of the annual worship on the *yantra* (symbol of the Goddess).

A telegram had been sent to Mataji for her instructions. A reply was received in due course to the following effect: "Let this

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form of the image of Kālī to become invisible now. There is no need to perform *pūjā* to the broken image."

Mataji had previously told Didi to seal up the shrine, should such a contingency arise. Now that Didi happened to be (by a strange coincidence ?) present in Dacca, she could thus give the necessary directions. The small shrine with its presiding deity was completely sealed up. It was already more than half underground. There was no need to undertake any major construction. The simple blocking up of the inner passage left the main temple undisturbed and accomplished the complete sealing of the temple of Kālī.

The Goddess Kālī had been with the devotees of Dacca for nearly twelve years. Some asked themselves if it was a coincidence that Kālī became invisible to them only after Bholanath himself had passed away.

Referring to this Kāli, Mataji has said, "I saw a moving image of Kāli, with no Śiva under her feet. Now why should there be no Śiva as is usual ? Why should such an image take form ? Whatever attitude of the mind all of you have, is reflected here. It was time for the annual Kāli-Pūjā. All of you were eager for the performance of the worship—that is why *Devī* herself appeared in the form of Kāli. Since the image was the personification of *Ādyā Śakti* there was no need for Śiva under her feet."

The Ramna Ashram at Dacca is at present unoccupied. By courtesy of the Government of East Pakistan, it remains as it was. A *bhairavī* (a woman ascetic) look after the images in the temple.

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Chapter Eleven

MATAJI'S FIRST JOURNEY ACROSS NORTHERN INDIA : 1927

The devotees had seriously started thinking about an Ashram for Mataji. Bhaiji said to her, "We need an Ashram where we can assemble and sing *kīrtana*. It will not be possible to do so always at Shahbagh." Mataji answered, "The whole world is an Ashram. Why do you need a special place ?" But Bhaiji insisted on having a place which they could call their own. Mataji answered, "If you feel so strongly about it, then try to acquire the plot of ground that contains the ruins of the Śiva temple at Ramna." Ramna was a vast property, formerly used as a polo-ground. Mataji disclosed that she had seen many saints and ascetics who had lived in that place in the past and had practised rigorous *sādhanā*.

Bhaiji found that the property was owned by the priest of the Ramna Kālī temple and had originally belonged to one Gokul Thakur. Bholanath now recalled that Mataji had mentioned this name to him at Bajitpur. The priest wanted a very large sum of money for the plot and so nothing could be done about it at the time. The Ashram was subequently built in 1931.

Bhaiji was keeping indifferent health all this time. On January 4, he became completely bed-ridden. He had developed tuberculosis of the lungs. During this severe stage of his illness, Mataji did not go to see him. He would pine for her *darśanā*, but she did not come, at least not physically. In other ways, he continued to receive many tokens of her grace. One day at Shahbagh Mataji said to Bholanath, "I see blood on everybody's

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lips." Bholanath immediately connected this with Bhaiji and went to see him. He found Bhaiji in the grip of an attack of severe hæmorrhage.

Pondering over this phase of his illness, Bhaiji later realised that even Mataji's absence had been a blessing in disguise. He was so preoccupied with thoughts of Mataji and her desertion of him in his hour of need that he had no time left to worry about his illness or the future. He also recollected an experience which recompensed him for all the hours of anguish he had suffered. "One night", he recorded, "my condition was very serious. The doctors had looked despondent. It was raining monotonously. The night was made hideous by howling dogs. Uncontrollable tremors shook my body in fear of the unknown. At that moment I saw Mataji sitting at my bedside. When I was about to exclaim in surprise at this unexpected visit, she seemed to place her hand on my head. I was at peace."

The devotees of Dacca were becoming accustomed to Mataji's frequent absence from Shahbagh. In the first week of April 1927, Mataji left Dacca to attend the *Pūrṇa-Kumbha** at Hardwar. Her party included Shashanka Mohan and Didi, Sri Rajendra Kushari and his wife, Matari Pisima, Didima, Dadamasai and Bholanath's youngest brother Jaminikumar. This was Mataji's first long journey.

They made a brief halt in Calcutta where they put up in an unoccupied house, thinking it would be inconvenient for anyone

* An ancient religious festival occurring at 12 years' interval in four holy cities, Hardwar, Prayag (Allahabad), Nasik and Ujjain.

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to accommodate such a large number of people. Rai Bahadur Jogesh Ghosh, the trustee of the Shahbagh gardens, was in Calcutta at that time. He was now very much devoted to Mataji. He had previously invited her to visit Paruldia, his village home. Many of the members of his family had travelled abroad and had adopted westernised ways of living. Nevertheless, they arranged for the *pūjā* of Kālī so that they would have an occasion to invite Mataji to their home.

In December 1926, Mataji had again gone to Paruldia this time on the occasion of the *Śrāddha** ceremony of Jogesh Chandra's mother. Mataji had assembled the girls of the house and said, "You have no specific duty to perform in the *śrāddha*, but you can all sing *kīrtana*." The eldest grand-daughter, Bhramara, who could sing beautifully, led the *kīrtana* and within a short while the entire household gathered round them. This was something quite unheard of in this house. There were many who had never heard a *kīrtana* before. Mataji moved about gracefully, surrounded by the girls. She went all over the house in this manner. Some Mohammedan workmen were standing on one side. She went up to them and asked them to sing the name of Allah, which they did with her.

The Rai Bahadur was now very keen to bring about a meeting of Mataji and his employer the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu. Mataji could be invited to a religious ceremony only, so he now arranged a *kīrtana* at Pyari Banu's house and brought an invitation from her for Mataji and her companions. The Nawabzadi was very pleased to see Mataji. Although a Muslim lady, she with her son and daughter joined in the singing of the *kīrtana* with Hindu devotees.

* Rites performed for a departed soul.

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From Calcutta Mataji's party came to Varanasi. It was arranged that they would put up with Sri Kunja Mohan Mukherjee, the younger brother of Shashanka Mohan. Didi's eldest sister and her husband Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee who had seen Mataji in Dacca previously, were at the station to receive her and her party, because Kunja Mohan had been obliged to leave the town that day.

Early next morning, Kunja Mohan returned home and met Mataji. He touched her feet and with folded hands recited a Durgā hymn. In the beginning, Mataji did not allow anyone to touch her feet. But in Bengal, just as in some other parts of India, this is a time-honoured custom. It is considered almost discourteous to merely raise hands in salutation or greeting in the presence of an elder or revered person. Mataji's reluctance could not be an effective barrier against this custom. She said, "Let it then be as you wish. After all, what is the difference between hands and feet ? If people may touch my hands they may touch my feet also." However, this slackening of the rule was of very short duration. The devotees themselves had to insist on its strict observance, because they were mortified to see that the very skin of her feet was being injured by the touch of innumerable hands.

The next day a *kīrtana* was organized at Kunja Mohan's house. Mataji, in an exalted mood, went all over the house swaying to the rhythm of the music.

The following day the entire party, augmented by a few from Varanasi, proceeded to Hardwar. After bathing in the holy river Ganges, they visited places of pilgrimage in the neighbourhood : Lachmanjhula, Hrishikesh and Bhimgoda. As mentioned earlier Jogesh Rai met her while Mataji was touring around these

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places. They also visited Agra, Mathura and Vrindaban on their return journey.

On the eve of her departure from Hardwar, Mataji asked Shashanka Mohan and Didi to remain there for three months and practise *sādhanā*. She said, "It is necessary for everybody to do his own work *(sādhanā)* in solitude, if possible." After the Kālī-Pūjā Shashanka Mohan had stayed at Shahbagh for five months. He would go to the Medical School once a day. On his way back he would visit his home and then return to Shahbagh. It was natural for Didi also to come and stay with her father so that she could look after his needs. Since she had the escort of her father, her relatives could not object to her living with such strange people as Mataji and her family. Thus Shashanka Mohan had embarked on a career which culminated in the highest renunciation. In his old age he was getting used to all sorts of hardships which ordinarily he would not have considered possible for him to bear. Walking long distances in hilly regions, bathing in cold water, eating at irregular times, or fasting for many long hours, all such things had woven themselves into the fabric of his daily life now. Yet, he seemed to be gaining in health. However, *sādhanā* and health were not the main considerations for Shashanka Mohan or Didi.

They had been in Mataji's company almost constantly for one year and four months. They were now taken aback at the prospect of being deprived of her *darśana* for three long months. Didi perhaps learnt her first lesson in unquestioning obedience from her father. Shashanka Mohan was an old man, more used to issuing commands and taking decisions than playing a subordinate role. But even he did not protest against Mataji's *kheyal*. He and Didi somehow reconciled themselves to this parting. It is interesting to record that they were recalled to Dacca by Mataji after only a month and a half.

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In the meantime, Bhaiji had recovered to some extent and was staying in one of the Government quarters in Ramna, near Shahbagh. This year Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai and other devotees decided to celebrate Mataji's birthday at Shahbagh. It was the first celebration of this kind. Mataji and Bholanath had just returned from Hardwar. The devotees gathered in Shahbagh in large numbers to perform *pūjā* and *kīrtana* in commemoration of Mataji's birth on April 30, 1896. She was now 31 years old.

Bhaiji was still quite ill. Mataji and Bholanath went to see him almost daily. Bhaiji once told Bholanath that he some times had a longing for a cool and refreshing bath. Mataji said, "Why don't you have one? There is a pond nearby."

Without any hesitation Bhaiji got up, although he was under strict medical orders not to leave his bed. Bholanath helped him to walk the distance of 60 to 70 yards to the pond to take a refreshing bath. Bhaiji was usually closely watched over by his wife, son and daughter and his faithful servant Khagen. But by a coincidence nobody was nearby at this particular time. His daughter, who was near at hand in case he wanted anything, had fallen asleep. She woke up to find Mataji sitting close beside her, and her father lying in bed as usual. The next day Bhaiji's wife complained to Mataji, "Look, Ma, he is supposed to be strictly confined to bed. But as soon as he gets the slightest opportunity he evidently goes out." She pointed to the burrs stuck on one of his dhotis, which showed that he had walked in the field. It was only after Bhaiji had recovered a few months later that he related the incident of the bath to his wife. She would not believe him at first, arguing that he could not have survived such an exertion. But

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he confirmed in all seriousness that it was true and reminded us of the burrs she had found on his clothes. Thereupon she had to accept the statement.

Crowds were still on the increase at Shahbagh. Besides, many persons would arrange for *kīrtana* and invite Mataji and Bholanath to their homes. Wherever Mataji went, a crowd would follow, invited or not. Different people had different reactions towards this phenomenon. According to their temperaments, some would deem it their good fortune that the dust of the feet of devotees was purifying their homes. Others would be annoyed at the presumption of an uninvited crowd trampling down gardens and making themselves at home wherever Mataji might be. Even ladies from conservative homes followed her about without any restraint. Men who could not have imagined themselves running after a 'woman saint' were now jealous of the women-folk when the latter surrounded Mataji and they themselves were obliged to catch only a glimpse of her from a distance. A glance, a word, a smile would throw out of gear the standards of behaviour of a lifetime. The customs and conventions of a whole community were, as it were, set at naught. The devotees of Dacca could not imagine a future without Mataji residing at Shahbagh like the presiding deity of the town. They had yet to learn that Mataji would not settle down anywhere and still be completely at home wherever she might be.

One evening in July, Mataji of her own accord visited a number of houses including those of Didi and Bhaiji. From Mataji's manner both Didi and her father concluded that she was about to leave them again. Bhaiji also had a similar premonition. He sent his servant Khagen to Shahbagh but was told that both Bholanath and Mataji were there. Shashanka

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Mohan who was once more staying at home felt very restless. It was then past midnight, yet he went to Shahbagh on foot. Mataji and Bholanath were surprised to see him at that hour. He said, "Mother, I cannot reassure myself that you will not suddenly go away without informing us." Mataji smiled and said, "You will come to know of it if I leave, won't you ?" This answer was far from satisfactory ; but he could not do anything more and so returned home.

Next morning he went to Shahbagh only to find that Mataji and Bholanath had already left for an unknown destination. In great distress he came to Bhaiji, who also did not know anything about Mataji's departure. Later in the day they heard from a messenger that Mataji and Bholanath had gone to Narayangunj, and from there they intended to visit other places. Mataji had been obliged to send a message because she had told Shahanka Mohan that he would be informed if she left Dacca. The devotees of Dacca gradually were beginning to appreciate that Mataji's *kheyāl* for travelling was not to be upset with impunity. Mataji did not stay long in any place. From Narayangunj Mataji went to Rajshahi (Atal Bihari's house), Calcutta and Deoghar.

Bhaiji in the meantime had been asked to go for a change. He had arranged to go to Vindhyachal in Uttar Pradesh, which is a health resort as well as a place of pilgrimage. On reaching Vindhyachal, Bhaiji felt depressed. How great was his joy when a few days later Mataji and Bholanath arrived at Vindhyachal to stay near his house. Kunja Mohan's family came from Varanasi to spend a few days with Mataji. His younger sons were little boys of about nine and seven years of age. One evening the entire party went for a walk. The region is hilly, the footpaths at places strewn over with rocks

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and boulders. Coming to a narrow track Mataji went ahead and outdistanced her companions. She stopped suddenly and signalled to others not to advance. Bholanath, however, ran forward and found a cobra with raised hood near Mataji's feet. Mataji said she had stepped on it. Without answering the question whether it had bitten her, she again started to walk ahead. The snake slipped away before they could do anything about it. The younger of the two boys suddenly said to his mother, "*Mā*, isn't it written in my brother's horoscope that he will die of snake-bite ? Mataji has made the snake bite herself today instead of my brother."

Everybody was surprised that the child should remember about the horoscope of his brother and remind his parents of it.

When Bhaiji heard that Mataji had stepped on a cobra, he hurriedly procured all sorts of medicines and rubbed them on her foot. Late at night two bluish fang marks became visible on her left foot. Everyone was highly amused at Bhaiji's expense, because he had applied the medicines on Mataji's right foot.

After visiting Chunar and other places in the neighbourhood Mataji returned to Dacca. A few days later, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by a huge party, went to Vidyakut. Mataji's parents also were with them. Vidyakut was full of Mataji's relatives and friends. They all came to see her and Mataji had to visit their home also. Didi was introduced to Mataji's playmates and much time was spent in pleasant recollections of her childhood.

Mataji's Visit to Kheora

From Vidyakut they went to Kheora by boat on August 3,

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1927. The cottage where Mataji was born was now in the possession of a Muslim family. Many of the Muslim neighbours whom Mataji had called uncle, brother and so on, diffidently came forward trying to recognise in Mataji the bright-looking little girl who had won their affection. The devotees asked Didima to point out the exact spot where Mataji had been born, but the surroundings were so changed that Didima felt rather bewildered. Mataji was strolling about, talking to people. She went round the cottage and stood still near a place where a heep of cow-dung had been stored. She picked up a little of the earth from this place and started crying violently. Didima now recognised many of the landmarks and stated definitely that this was the spot where Mataji had been born. It had been enclosed by sheets of cane-matting and had a temporary roof.

Bholanath was upset to see Mataji cry and wanted to leave immediately. Mataji then wiped her tears and called the owners of the place. She said to them : "It will be beneficial for all of you if you use this place for prayers and meditations only." They all readily agreed to do so. Shashanka Mohan wanted to give them some money towards the upkeep of the ground, but they would not accept it, saying that they themselves would do whatever was necessary. Didi brought away the clod of earth that Mataji had picked up.

The party then started for Vidyakut. In this short time many people had not received the news of Mataji's visit. When the boat was about to draw away from the bank, they saw many people running towards them. Mataji's playmate and namesake Nirmala Devi came up now. Shrish Chandra who had been like a son to Didima when she had lived in Kheora also stood on the bank. They wanted Mataji to stay

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for a few days, but she in her own charming manner bade them farewell and came away.

They spent a few days in Vidyakut. On the day of departure, Mataji caught hold of the arm of one of her old cousins and started weeping in the manner of a young woman going away from the village of her parents to her husband's home. The cousin placed his hand on her head and attempted to console her. All the relations and friends who had come to see her off, now started weeping with her. Mataji stepped into the boat. There were tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. Biren Chandra said, "Mataji wanted the others to cry for her and remember her. That is why she started them off by shedding a few precious tears herself."

Didi and the other devotees from Dacca were amused and charmed to see Mataji in the role of a newly-married village maiden bidding farewell to her people.

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Chapter Twelve

FAREWELL TO SHAHBAGH

Mataji did not stay in Dacca long. She again left Shahbagh for Calcutta at the invitation of Nawabzadi Pyari Banu to attend the weddings of her son and daughter. The Nawabzadi asked her children to make obeisance to Mataji before the beginning of the marriage ceremonies.

After the ceremonies were over, the Nawabzadi told Mataji that for many years there had been a misunderstanding between her and her mother-in-law. She was now going to meet her for a talk and requested Mataji to be present with them. "If you sit with us," she said, "I am sure, we shall arrive at a solution of our difficulties".

Mataji conceded to her request and the Nawabzadi's expectation were borne out. The differences of long-standing were smoothed out and she and her mother-in-law became reconciled after many years. The Nawabzadi announced her intention to come to Dacca now, which she could not do earlier because of this estrangement with the Begam.

On the occasion of these marriages, many notable people of Calcutta had been invited, including Aparna Devi, the daughter of Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das. When Aparna Devi saw Mataji she related that many years ago her mother Vasanti Devi had dreamt of a lady in white telling her to beware of an approaching calamity. From the description her

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mother had given, Aparna Devi thought that the lady in white must have been Mataji. Her father had passed away shortly after the dream. This dream had a sort of confirmation not known to Aparna Devi. A few days before the death of C. R. Das, somebody had shown Mataji a photograph of Vasanti Devi and her husband. Mataji without knowing anything about them had at that time said spontaneously, "This lady is facing a bereavement. She will be a widow soon."

Aparna Devi now sent a message to her mother. Vasanti Devi came and looked long and earnestly at Mataji. She then said slowly, "It was so long ago, I do not remember clearly but I think this was the figure I saw." She, her daughter and other members of her family became very attached to Mataji. They would come to see her whenever Mataji visited Calcutta.

Soon after Mataji returned to Shahbagh, Pyari Banu with her son and daughter also arrived in Dacca. They expressed a wish to eat a meal cooked by Mataji because they had heard a lot about her culinary arts. Mataji invited them to Shahbagh one day and cooked an elaborate meal with the help of Didi and Matari Pisima. The Nawabzadi and her children found all the preparations most delicious. The Nawabzadi made an offering of a necklace of gold to the image of Kālī. They had heard that Mataji had once performed the *Namāz* like a Muslim at the graveside of the Arab *fakirs* and requested her to do so again in their presence. One day they took Mataji to the mausoleum and sat near the grave in silent meditation. After some time Mataji in an exalted mood began to speak in a strange language. Pyari Banu's daughter exclaimed : "She is reciting a passage from the Quoran." Mataji, however, did not perform the *Namāz* that day.

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Mataji was constantly invited by the new devotees to visit their towns and villages so that others might also share in this unique experience. One of them, Dinesh Chandra Rai, the Munsif of Pirozepur had invited her to visit the place. Another devotee, Girija Shankar Rai, was pressing her to come to his village, Baishari. It was arranged that Mataji would go to Gauhati on pilgrimage to Kamakshya. On her way back she would visit Pirozepur and Baishari. Many accompanied her from Dacca. Some devotees came from Calcutta to join her at Gauhati. In the meantime, Dinesh Rai sent a telegram saying that he had been transferred from Pirozepur and was, therefore, obliged to go away, but Mataji should not change her plans because the whole town was looking forward to her arrival. Many from Dacca were also waiting for her at Pirozepur.

On arrival, after disembarking from the steamer, Mataji and her party had to come a little way by boat. Before the boats drew up at the bank, they heard the sound of melodious *kīrtana*. A huge crowd was approaching with flowers, garlands and incense to welcome Mataji. Mataji became one with the spirit of the *kīrtana*. She walked along with the *kīrtana* party swaying to the rhythm. The people looked at her flower-decked radiant form and were transported into a world of indescribable joy. In this joyous mood they reached the house where Mataji and her party were to stay. They were told that with the exception of one old woman who was unable to walk, everyone in Pirozepur had come to see Mataji. The local people took Mataji to the house of this woman later on.

Girija Shankar came to take Mataji to Baishari. Here also Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during *kīrtana*. Wherever Mataji went, *bhoga* was cooked on a large scale and the people assembled partook of the *prasāda*. It seemed as if the entire countryside

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was celebrating a festival. Mataji went on to the village of Sohagdal. Transport was mostly by boat. Mataji would sometimes walk long distances with the *kīrtana* parties from village to village. The entire population would accompany her singing *kīrtana*. They had a simple faith that if *kīrtana* could be kept up incessantly, Mataji would not be able to leave them.

The devotees experienced a sense of togetherness and belonging. Strangers became friends. Differences of position, caste and creed became meaningless. All of them mingled together to make up a throng of happy people. The continuous *kīrtana* was creating an atmosphere out of this world. But departure could not be postponed indefinitely. The festivities came to an end. Mataji had to return to Dacca. Everyone sadly bade farewell to her, imploring her to come again.

Meanwhile the mud hut at Siddheshwari, built as described earlier, was falling into disrepair. Shashanka Mohan came forward with the suggestion that a *pucca* building should be constructed in its place. Mataji said, "I realize that you will not be able to preserve the sanctity of 'the hollow' in future. Well, things must take their own course. If you must build a concrete building, then first brick up the hollow and make a platform on it, so that nobody can step on it inadvertently."

Shashanka Mohan was willing to pay for the entire construction of the new building, but as other devotees wanted to share in the cost, it was decided to accept voluntary contributions. The room was completed in the beginning of the year 1928. This may be called the first Ashram.

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Bhaiji was at Giridih, a health resort, because he was still far from well. He had improved a little but had not entirely recovered. Perhaps, in response to his mute prayers, Mataji again prepared to leave Dacca with Bholanath, Maroni and a few others.

Prafulla Ghosh's wife Hirandi said jokingly, "You must come back soon, otherwise we shall close the gates of Shahbagh and not let you in." Mataji smiled and merely said, "Is that so ?" On the day of her departure from Shahbagh, Didi saw Mataji walk round the extensive gardens in a particular mood of her own. Here and there she would touch the walls caressingly. But her expression was remote and inscrutable and Didi did not dare ask her why she behaved in this strange manner.

On her way to Giridih, Mataji halted in various places. Bhaiji had written some songs and *kīrtana* containing the word 'Ma'* He had always felt that, if at all *kīrtana* was necessary, it should contain this word, along with the Names of the Lord, such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Hari. He himself was not very fond of singing *kīrtana* and would be amused at the sight of people singing and dancing with abandon. However, now *kīrtana* came to his mind spontaneously. He showed the hymn to Mataji and Bholanath and with the latter's approval sent it to Kulada asking him to add it to the list of *kīrtanas* sung daily at Shahbagh. This hymn touched the hearts of people, especially because Mataji was then away from Shahbagh. Much of the pain of separation was assuaged by singing this hymn every evening.

Mataji left Giridih for Calcutta and then started for Vin-

* The last stanza of '*Jayahṛdayavāsinī*'

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dhyachal, Chunar and Mirzapur. Mataji was constantly on the move. This time they went as far as Jaipur and Bharatpur.

While Mataji and Bholanath were travelling in Rajasthan, the estates of the Nawabzadi Pyari Banu were handed over to the Court of Wards. As a result, Rai Bahadur Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Bhudev Basu and Bholanath lost their jobs. Shahbagh had to be vacated. The image of Kālī had to be removed as well. The devotees gathered together and rented a house in the city. Exercising great care they brought the image to that house. Didima, Dadamashai, Makhan, Amulya, Matari Pisima and Kamalakanta also came to stay in the rented house in Tikatuli, a locality of the city.

Mataji's birthday drew near and the devotees decided upon the new room at Siddheshwari as the venue for the celebrations. Mataji returned to Dacca in the last week of April 1928. Niranjan Rai's wife was very ill. From the station Mataji went straight to see her, and then came to the rented house in Tikatuli.

Hirandi's words spoken in jest had proved prophetic. Mataji had stayed for four years in Shahbagh. She told the dejected family of Jogesh Ghosh not to worry about the lost job; what had happened was for their future good. Much later, they realised the truth of this statement.

This time Bhaiji had returned to Dacca with Mataji and Bholanath. He was still far from well. The doctors in Calcutta had advised him to give up his work and lead a retired life of complete rest. Bhaiji told Mataji that he had understood from the doctors that he had only a few months

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to live and must not do anything to shorten that time. Mataji answered, "Nothing will happen to you for the next few years. Come back to Dacca and rejoin your service. Then we shall see."

On the day Bhaiji rejoined duty, Mataji and Bholanath went with him to his office and saw him seated at his desk.

He as well as everybody else were convinced that he had received a new lease of life due to Mataji's grace. Mr. Finlow, the Director of Agriculture, Government of Bengal, had great regard and affection for his subordinate. He asked Bhaiji one day, "How did you cure yourself of this terrible disease ?"

Bhaiji answered unhesitatingly, "I have been cured by the grace of Mataji. She did not give me any amulets or charms, I have been under medical treatment, but the doctors said that the disease was incurable, and I too know that without Mataji's grace it was so." Mr. Finlow answered quietly, "I do not disbelieve you. We have heard of similar cases of divine grace in our country also."

One evening Bhaiji was asked by an old gentleman, Sri Shyama Charan Mukherji, "Is it possible that somebody's span of life can be lengthened ?" In the middle of the discussion, he suddenly fell silent and went away after a little while. Next morning he came again and said to Bhaiji, "Do you know why I left you so abruptly yesterday ? While we were talking, I suddenly saw a bright light behind your chair, enveloping you in its radiance. I looked about but could not see any visible source of the light. There was no light from outside either. I thought I would ponder about this in solitude before telling you anything about it. Last night I came

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to the conclusion that everything is possible by Divine Grace. You are to be congratulated on the fact that you live under the protective grace of Mataji."

The celebrations on the occasion of Mataji's birthday in May 1928 were held with great festivity at Siddheshwari. Mataji was ever ready to help or give advice if asked, in all matters pertaining to religious practices. This fact became the mainstay of the celebrations. The devotees arranged for *akhaṇḍa japa*, *kīrtana* and various *pūjās* to fill up the days between the two dates of Mataji's birthday, one according to the usual Calendar and the other according to the Lunar Calendar. In this way the devotees made sure of Mataji's presence and participation in the festivities. The devotees were desirous of worshipping Mataji through a proper *pūjā* at 3 a.m. (coinciding with the exact time of her birth) as the culmination of the functions.

So, on the final day, Bholanath was requested to perform the *pūjā* on their behalf. The people gathered round Mataji where she was lying in an inert heap on the ground in a state of *samādhi*. The devotees arranged the accessories of *pūjā* in front of her motionless body. They sat around in silent meditation or singing *kīrtana* or doing *japa*, each according to his own aptitude. In a deep devotion the assembly watched Bholanath offer *pūjā* to the deity most dear to their hearts. The devotees of Dacca believed that Bholanath's dedicated worship would invoke the presence of the Divine power in

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clay images. Mataji's presence already filled the hearts and minds of the congegration. Her motionless body was covered with flowers, garlands and new clothes.

Dawn was breaking by the time the *pūjā* was over. This early pattern for the celebrations of Mataji's birthday has remained unchanged. Devotees had come from far and near. People from Calcutta, Varanasi and other towns came to join in the festivities. This gave them a unique opportunity of coming together as a family.

A few days after the *janmotsava* (birthday) Mataji with Bholanath and Bhaiji went to Tangail in district Mymensingh. During her absence from town, another house named 'Uttama Kutir' was rented by the devotees of Dacca, as the house in Tikatuli had proved to be not very convenient. Mataji came to Uttama Kutir on her return from Tangail in June 1928. She again left Dacca to visit Barishal, Vikrampur and Munshiganj at the invitation of devotees. She had the occasion to go to Atpara, Bholanath's home, during the course of these travels. Her sister-in-law, Pramoda Devi, was living in their home. She wanted Mataji, who had come to another house in the village, to stay with her in their home. Mataji very humbly sent back a message to say, "She knows that I have never disregarded her slightest wish or command. But now I am unable to comply with this request. Please ask her to forgive me."

Mataji returned to Dacca for a few days. In the meantime Kunja Mohan had been repeatedly inviting them to visit Varanasi. It was decided that they would go to Varanasi and also visit Dinesh Rai at Tangail. Whenever Mataji went on

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a journey, she would take with her one or two of her old relatives who wanted to see holy places. In this way many, who ordinarily would not have dreamt of moving out of their houses, had travelled to distant places of pilgrimage. This time also one of Mataji's aunts accompanied them, besides Didi and her father.

At Tangail Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas* during the *kīrtana* at Dinesh Rai's house. His wife had arranged for *pūjā*, and the entire household warmly welcomed Mataji and her party, striving to be of service to them in every possible way.

At the time of departure, the festive mood was disturbed by an unfortunate incident. For some reason, Bholanath lost his temper. Dinesh Rai and his family were full of remorse and felt very unhappy that such a thing should have happened.

On reaching the boat, Mataji lay down in an inert heap. After a few moments she raised herself and her face assumed a terrifying expression. Bholanath immediately calmed down and started to plead with her in his own characteristic manner, which was a nice mixture of coaxing and scolding. He by no means humble by nature but on such occasions would do anything to appease Mataji. (This was not the first time that Bholanath's anger had brought such a change in Mataji's demeanour. Perhaps Mataji found this the most effective way of teaching him to control his temper.)

In response to Bholanath's entreaties Mataji finally said in an indistinct voice, "Let us go back". The boat had now almost reached the steamer. It was turned around and they went back to their host's house.

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The whole family were beside themselves with joy to see Mataji return to them and to find that Bholanath's anger had evaporated completely and that he was his usual cheerful self. The festive mood thus restored, Mataji left for Dacca the next day.

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Chapter Thirteen

THE DEVELOPING PATTERN OF FUTURE LIFE

Mataji came to Varanasi in September 1928. Kunja Mohan had arranged for an elaborate programme of *kīrtana* and Mataji passed through ecstatic moods. Her whole countenance radiated an effulgence beautiful to behold. Kunja Mohan had invited many persons to come and have *darśana* of Mataji. There were hosts of visitors daily and Mataji had to sit in the open every evening. People from the audience asked her questions and she replied in her own characteristic way. She never paused to think or reflect, the answers seemed to come spontaneously to her. This was the first occasion in her life when she sat in an open gathering talking freely to a host of strangers. It was during this visit to Varanasi that Mahamahopadhyaya Sri Gopinath Kaviraj, who was then Principal of the Queen's College, saw her for the first time. He listened to her answers and remarked : "Wonderful, this far exceeds anything of a like nature I have ever heard before." Many persons such as Nepal Chandra Chakravarty (Narayan Swamiji) and Swami Shankaranandaji met her then and became lifelong devotees.

From early morning till late at night, there would be a constant stream of men and women passing in and out of the house. Nobody cared to find out who the owner was. The people came singly, in family groups, or in crowds, bringing offerings of flowers, garlands, sweets, fruits, incense and clothes. They would besiege Mataji so uninterruptedly that she did not

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have time to wash, eat or change. Days and nights passed as if in a dream. Bholanath wanted to stem the tide of ever-increasing crowds of strangers of all types. The situation was getting out of hand. He tried in vain to persuade Mataji not to go on giving unstintingly of her time, leisure and energy. But Mataji remained firm : "Now you are not to say anything to me", she said, "when there was yet time, I warned you, but you did not heed my warning. Now you cannot turn the tide back." Bholanath's misgivings were temporary only, and the general air of great rejoicing was not marred in any way.

Late one night a few members of the family were sitting with Mataji on the open terrace. She suddenly said, "Death is coming." Kunja Mohan's wife, a fond mother of many children, said, "Ma, let it come to me alone." Mataji looked at her and smiled a little, not saying anything more. In the general mood of joy and festivity, this slight note of discord was soon forgotten by everybody.

On the day Mataji was due to leave Varanasi, she said to Didi, "Today is full-moon day,* but I feel like eating rice with boiled potatoes. All of you, however, must observe the rule of fasting. I do not eat on so many other days when you eat. So my example need not be followed by you today." Didi was amused and astonished because the previous night her aunt, Kunja Mohan's wife, had said to her, "There is such a crowd always, I don't seem to get close to Mataji at any time. One day I wanted to feed her boiled rice and potatoes in big mouthfuls like one of my children in my kitchen." Didi had not said anything to Mataji knowing she would not eat rice on a full-moon day.

* Since the days at Shahbagh, Mataji and others were fasting on full-moon and new-moon days, partaking of *prasāda* after *bhoga* at night.

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Kunja Mohan's wife was overjoyed when she heard that Mataji herself had asked for rice that day. Mataji ate an unusually hearty meal from the hands of her hostess before her departure to the station.

The family bade her a sorrowful farewell. Mataji returned to Dacca *via* Calcutta. While in Calcutta, news was received by telegram of the sudden death of Kunja Mohan's wife. This lady's strong attachment to Mataji may be gauged from the following incident. Didi relates: "It so happened one day in Varanasi that Mataji was at my sister's place. My aunt could not bear this separation from Mataji while she was in the same town. Almost everybody was with Mataji already. My aunt was alone at home to look after the needs of her family. When her children had settled down, she quietly donned the clothes of a man. She wound a turban on her head to hide her hair. Then with a stick in her hand, looking like a villager, she came to my sister's house walking through the lanes of Varanasi at the dead of night. Everyone marvelled at her ingenuity and courage." Now hearing of her sudden death, Didi understood why Mataji had gone out of her way to fulfil her aunt's wish.

At the invitation of Prafulla Ghosh, the Rai Bahadur's son, Mataji went to Comilla for a few days. From Comilla she proceeded to Calcutta. The Rai Bahadur and his wife were also there. The Rai Bahadur had greatly changed his ways of living. Although outwardly he did not appear to be devout, he had the heart of a devotee. One day he told Mataji, "I had a dear friend in my college days. He went away to become a *sannyāsī* and look what a life I have led." Once, when Mataji was partaking of some fruit and sweets, he said, "I wish I could feed Mataji a little of this. But I have never

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observed restrictions in matters of food. Will Mataji allow me to feed her ?" Mataji said, "It does not matter. If you wish to do so, you can feed me something." After she had taken a little fruit from his hand, she said to him, "From now on, whatever you eat, you must offer to God first." He demurred, saying, I eat all sorts of things." "Never mind, whatever you eat, you must first mentally dedicate to God." This method effected a radical change in his eating habits.

Jogesh Chandra's eldest grand-daughter Bhramara was devoted to Mataji. Mataji affectionately called her *Baromā* (eldest mother—a term used by children to distinguish the eldest aunt in the house). Bhramara could sing beautifully and would sing for hours for Mataji. She was inseparable from Mataji when the latter was in Calcutta.

Mataji returned to Uttama Kutir in Dacca. Bhaiji one day said to her, "You say heat and cold are same to you. Would you not feel the heat of a live coal if it were placed on your hand or foot ?" Mataji answered, "Why don't you try and see ?" Bhaiji hurriedly changed the topic. A few days later, when Mataji was alone, she placed a live coal on her foot. When it was burnt out, somebody entered the kitchen and was horrified to discover deep burn marks on her foot. Mataji said, "I did not feel anything. First I saw that the fine hair curled and was singed off. Then the skin crinkled and blackened, then the flesh started burning and emitted a smell. Now the coal has exhausted itself and is lying quite still in the burn it has created."

Bhaiji was mortified to find a bad sore on Mataji's foot due to this experiment. Through his ministrations the sore healed up gradually.

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At about this time Niranjan Rai's wife fell seriously ill. Mataji went to see her every day. If the patient saw clouds in the sky, she would worry desperately lest it might rain and prevent Mataji from coming. But it never so happened that Mataji could not visit her. Mataji's companions were very fond of this devout couple and felt concerned about her illness. One day Didi's eldest brother, Biren Chandra, sat in Mataji's room praying fervently for the recovery of the patient. When he opened his eyes he found Mataji looking at him with very bright eyes. He had a strong feeling that his prayer had been heard and the lady would recover. However, a few days later (26th November 1928) she died. Biren Chandra felt deeply upset. His conviction that Mataji had granted his prayer had been very powerful. While sitting in Mataji's room he fell a prey to all sorts of mutinous thoughts. Mataji looked at him and said, "Didn't you ask me to see that she gets well ? Recovery of the body is not the ultimate welfare. I have made her well." Biren Chandra was amazed to hear this answer to his unspoken question and bowed his head in penitence.

As in Shahbagh, so also now at Uttama Kutir, people flocked to visit Mataji and Bholanath at all times. As written earlier, Bholanath was a warm-hearted person. His friendliness and affectionate nature quickly dispelled the diffidence of newcomers. Uttama Kutir became a venue for the gathering of friends and acquaintances. But Mataji, in a way which is so peculiarly her own, broke up this atmosphere of a home very soon.

One day in December, Mataji walked out of Uttama Kutir with Bholanath and came to the temple of Dhakeshwari. From

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there they proceeded to Siddheshwari. Mataji expressed a *kheyāl* not to return to Uttama Kutir. The devotees came to know of this sudden decision to leave the house in Dacca. One by one they collected at Siddheshwari. Beddings and other utensils were brought over from Uttama Kutir. The image of Kālī also had to be fetched. This was the fourth time that the image had to be moved. The *yajña* fire was being kept alive by daily oblations. Along with the image of Kālī this also had to be moved with every change of residence. Didima and Dadamashai left for their village, Vidyakut. Makhan went to stay at Shashanka Mohan's house. Bholanath's nephews were now in service and in other towns.

Following Mataji's instructions, Bholanath started living in the small room of the Kālī temple at Siddheshwari and became engaged in *sādhanā*. Mataji stayed almost alone in the single room of the Ashram. Kamala Kanta cooked for her. Kulada, as usual, came every day to offer oblations to the sacred fire. The devotees were asked not to stay for more than ten minutes during their visit to Siddheshwari.

Bholanath's Sādhanā

One evening Mataji told visitors from town that Bholanath was going away the following day and that all of them could go and see him off at the station. She did not disclose his destination. Bholanath was observing silence for the last few days, so he also did not say anything.

The next day Mataji, Didi, Bhaiji and others went to the station to see him off by the Calcutta Mail. Jogeshdada was

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to accompany Bholanath. They took a little of the *yajña* fire with them. Breaking his silence, Bholanath talked to everyone bidding them farewell and then embarked on his journey with Jogeshdada.

Mataji and Bholanath had so far travelled together. This was a departure from the usual practice. The devotees returned with Mataji to Siddheshwari. Kamala Kanta and a widowed lady were to stay with Mataji. Since Kamala Kanta was merely a boy, it was decided that Shashanka Mohan would spend the nights at Siddheshwari. The other devotees, following the rule of 'ten minutes', returned to Dacca. Deprived of the presence of Bholanath, the devotees were at a loss to know how to look after Mataji. They had always been guided by him. By common consent Shashanka Mohan, the oldest and the most respected of them, was chosen to act as Mataji's guardian.

After a few days, Surendra Mohan Mukherji arrived from Calcutta with a letter from Bholanath. Bholanath had written from Tarapeeth in Birbhum district, directing Surendra Mohan to go to Dacca and to escort Mataji to Tarapeeth. He had also written to Mataji.

Arrangements were made for Mataji's departure. She put one or two old blankets and a few articles of clothing in a bundle and this was all she took with her. She had no proper bedding as she hardly ever used a bed. Her method of resting was to wrap herself up in a sheet and lie on the floor. Mataji never permitted herself more than the bare minimum of personal effects.

At the station a large crowd had collected to see off

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Mataji. When she was seated in her compartment, she took off two of her gold bangles and gave them to Bhaiji, saying, "Get five gold rings made out of these and give them to Jotu, Amulya, Sitanath, Makhan and Subodh." These boys had almost constantly been with Mataji and were great enthusiasts for singing *kīrtana*.

Mataji had left Dacca many times before, but never in this strange manner. Tarapeeth was known to be a desolate place, meant for ascetics only. It was famous for its cremation ground of great sanctity, but it was not a location where people ordinarily lived. Besides, Mataji would be practically alone. Didi was overwhelmed with worry about Mataji's welfare. Mataji had to be fed, looked after when in exalted moods and reminded of so many daily routine affairs. So, Didi was grieved that Mataji was going to stay alone in an unknown place, although she could have stayed in comfort in Dacca surrounded by a host of devotees. But Mataji's *kheyāl* had to be obeyed.

Just before the train started, Mataji began to weep in a most touching manner. The devotees who had so far held their emotion in check with great difficulty, now broke down completely. The released flood of tears somewhat lightened the sorrow that had threatened to overwhelm them. The train moved off. Didi and the other devotees returned home with heavy hearts.

After a few days Shashanka Mohan received a letter from Bholanath asking him and Didi to join them and to bring Matori Pisima and Maroni.

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When Didi and her father arrived at Tarapeeth, they found that many devotees from Calcutta were already there. At night, Didi and Shashanka Mohan heard from Bholanath the reason for his coming to Tarapeeth. While practising *sādhanā* at Siddheshwari, he had a vision of a headless Kālī. He told Mataji about it. She advised him to go to Tarapeeth, although she hardly knew anything about the place. Accordingly, Bholanath came to the place and took up his abode on the open *varandah* of the temple of Tārā Devī (a form of Kālī). Bholanath could not understand why he had been directed to come to Tarapeeth because he could not see any resemblance between the image of Tārā and the image of his vision. However, he stayed on practising his *sādhanā*. In a few days he became well-known to the priests. One night while he was sitting in the temple in meditation, the priests came to make arrangements for the night.* They were now used to Bholanath and treated him with respect as an ascetic. So he was not asked to leave the temple. The priests took off the ornaments, and then Bholanath was amazed to see that the head itself was removed from the body. Before opening the temple doors in the morning, the head was replaced and the image was decorated with ornaments, flowers and garlands. Only the priests and their families knew that the image of Tārā had a headless body.

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* Worship is '*ātmavat*', that is, as you would do for yourself, taking for granted the fact, that nothing at all is necessary for God. The image is given meals, bathed, clothed, laid down to rest for the night and aroused in the morning. All this is done by meditation accompanied by relevant *mantras* and *mudrās*. The image actually does not have to be moved. Worship with external accessories is of secondary importance. Every deity is symbolized in a *yantra*—a small mystic diagram which is the real object of worship in front of the priest. The image is the concrete and solid form which the pilgrims see from a distance. This is the general practice. Every temple, however, may have its own tradition which is handed down from generation to generation of the priests.

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Didi and her father were thrilled to hear all this from Bholanath. Bholanath had obviously attained a high spiritual state at Tarapeeth. Throughout the day and night he would remain seated in the open *varandah* of the temple. He did not feel the cold. His face would be covered with flies but he would not notice it. Formerly a very heavy smoker, he did not now smoke at all and, furthermore, ate very little. It was obvious that he was absorbed in a blissful state.

Tarapeeth was sparsely populated by the families of the priests. Mataji used to roam about by herself during the day and sleep in the Śiva temple at night. The wives of the priests would invite her to their houses and entertain her with sweets. The day Mataji left, they were all very sad. One of them said, "We are poor people. We can give you a poor man's fare only." Another said, "As soon as I heard the horn of the car, I felt depressed thinking that the car had come to fetch you, even as Akrura had come to take away Srī Kṛṣṇa."

Mataji laughed and said, "Why are you saying such things? I am just like one of you. I have been here for such a short while. It is because of the goodness of your hearts that you have been so kind and loving to me." The woman answered, "We are the people of Tarapeeth which is *Siddhasthāna*. We can recognize people for what they are. We see so many *sādhus* and ascetics. Some are genuine and some are not. You are the Goddess Incarnate. Why do you try to hide yourself from us?"

Didi realized how foolish and unnecessary had been her fears concerning Mataji's welfare. Even in this remote and desolate spot, Mataji was cherished and had been looked after

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as well as anywhere else. In a few days Mataji had endeared herself to those simple people and forged permanent bonds of love and loyalty between them.

Mataji and her companions came to Rampurhat by car and then entrained for Calcutta. There they put at Bholanath's sister's place at Salkia. Jogeshdada went to stay in an abandoned derelict house with the sacred fire which, Mataji said, was not to be brought inside a residential home. Bholanath, who had received some instructions at Tarapeeth, carried on with his *sādhanā*. He had also been told to visit Tarapeeth for one day every year for the next three years.

At Biren Chandra's invitation they now paid a short visit to Agra.

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Chapter Fourteen

MATAJI'S KHEYAL TO LEAVE DACCA

On their return to Calcutta Mataji received a telegram from the students of the Medical School at Dacca asking her to permit Shashanka Mohan to return to Dacca for a few days. They had not written to him directly assuming that he would not go without Mataji's permission. Thereafter, Didi and Shashanka Mohan went back to Dacca, while Mataji and Bholanath left for Puri whence they proceeded to Vidyakut. Now that Bholanath had no job to go back to, there was no particular need for them to return to Dacca. When Shashanka Mohan and others realized that Mataji might not return to Dacca at all, he, accompanied by a few others, went to Vidyakut. They persuaded Bholanath to come back to Dacca a few days before the celebrations on Mataji's birthday in May 1929.

In the meantime the efforts of Bhaiji, Niranjan Rai and others had borne fruit. The plot of ground indicated by Mataji at Ramna had been procured and a small mud-hut constructed for Mataji's use. Mataji had expressed her *kheyāl* not to stay in a brick-building. Arrangements were made for her to come to the new room after the *Janmotsava*.

The *Janmotsava* or the celebrations on Mataji's birthday were held again at Siddheshwari with great enthusiasm by the devotees of Dacca and other places.

Mataji was invited to enter the precincts of the new Ashram

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at Ramna in May 1929 amidst great rejoicings. Baul Chandra had brought ornaments made of flowers for Mataji. She sat on the steps of the new Ashram, dressed in a red-bordered *śaree* and decked in beautiful ornaments made of flowers. There was a glow on her face. Mataji looked like a luminous image of indescribable beauty, or rather like the personification of the human concept of the glorious and majestic form of the Divine Mother.

The devotees were offering *praṇāma* one by one. Mataji looked at Bholanath with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes and said, "Won't you also offer *praṇāma*?" Bholanath smilingly shook his head. Maroni* who was standing nearby piped up, "I have seen grandfather doing *praṇāma* to grandmother." Everybody heartily enjoyed this disclosure from an unexpected source. The happy throng of devotees kept awake the whole night; in fact, hardly they realised when the night was over. Mataji had not entered the new room. In the morning she was still lying outside under the canopy put up for the celebrations. The *kīrtana* that was continuously being sang for many days was concluded. Many devotees partook of *prasāda* that day also. *Bhoga* was ready, Mataji was roused, helped to get up, wash and change. Mataji sat near Dadamashai at the time of the mid-day meal and he fed her a few morsels. A little later she sat with her mother and ate with her also. By this time it was nearly evening. Everybody was tired after the prolonged festivities. Some came to say good-bye. Mataji said, "Why do you go now? Won't you sing *kīrtana*? Ask father also." Thus Dadamashai went and sat with his *kīrtana* party under the canopy. He was never too tired to sing *kīrtana*.

* Bholanath's sister's grand-daughter, who was left in his care by her parents.

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Bholanath had gone to visit Niranjan Rai's son who was ill. He had planned to go to Didi's and Bhaiji's houses also. Mataji went round the Ashram, sometimes touching the boundary walls. Didi was suddenly and a little apprehensively reminded of how Mataji had touched the walls of Shahbagh before leaving it for the last time. But she did not have the courage to say anything to Mataji. Mataji's close companions know that there are times when the boldest among them dare not say a word to her. Not that she looks grim or forbidding, but absolutely remote and unapproachable. It did not seem at that time that she knew or recognized anybody or cared in the least about their opinions.

Everybody guessed that Mataji would do something which would be difficult for them to accept, but nobody spoke. She went and sat with her father, singing with him for a little while. After some time, *mantras* spontaneously poured from her lips in a stream. The music and sound of that ethereal language held everyone spell-bound. Shashanka Mohan had always wanted to write down a few of the *mantras* she uttered. Mataji now looked at him and said, "You may write if you can." He and a few others noted down some of the *mantras* as best as they could.

After some time Mataji moved round with the *kīrtana* party for a few minutes. She abruptly halted and said, "All of you must allow me to go away now. I shall leave Dacca to-day."

"Ma, how can we do that!" The exclamation was wrung from the people around her.

Like a small child in anguish, Mataji appealed to her

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companions ; "Please don't put obstacles in my path, otherwise I shall leave this body here with you and go away."

There was a hush of silence now. Everyone looked at her with tearful eyes. Shashanka Mohan offered to fetch Bholanath, but Mataji said it was not necessary. Mataji said again, "Please explain to Bholanath when he comes. Tell him not to say, 'no' to me."

"But who will go with you ?"—somebody asked.

"As far as I am concerned", answered Mataji, "I do not need anyone. But if you think that I should be escorted, then I can ask father to come with me."

Dadamashai went in to pack a few things and get ready to leave with her. Mataji packed nothing for herself. She sat out in the open, the people forming a silent group around her.

"When is the next train ?"—Mataji asked after some time"

"At midnight", somebody answered.

"Please arrange for me to leave by that train."

Shashanka Mohan had sent word to Bhaiji. Bholanath was with him at the time and they both came over.

Mataji asked Bholanath for his permission to leave Dacca with her father. Before Bholanath could express his displeasure, Mataji said, "If you say, 'no', I shall leave this body at your feet just now."

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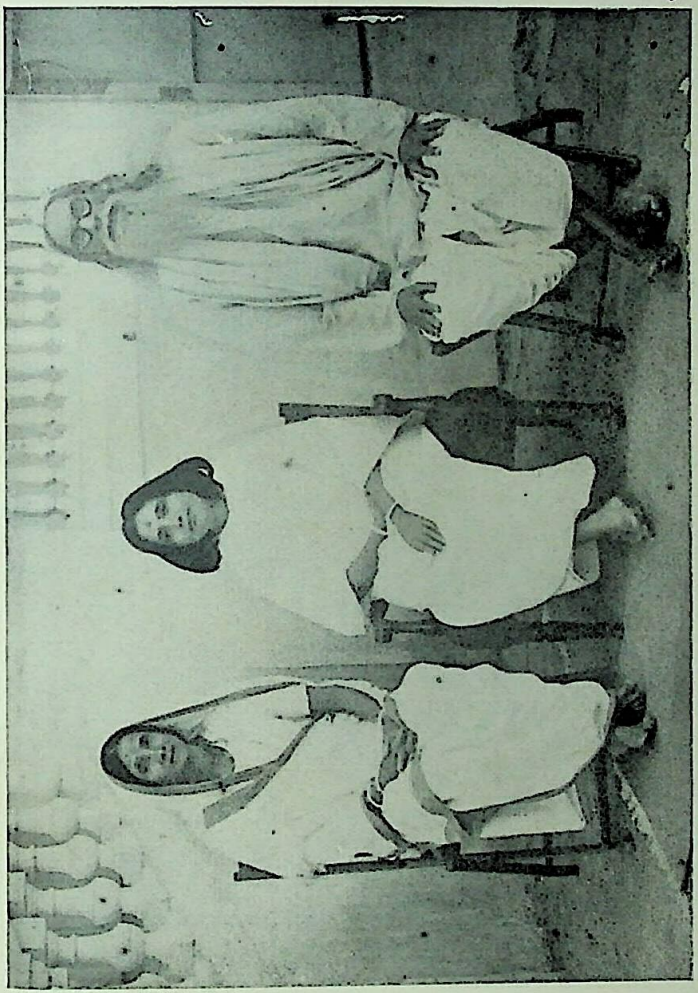

Mataji with her parents

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Bholanath was silenced. He was the last man to call into question the truth of her statement. Mataji had never before expressed her *kheyāl* so forcefully. Perhaps he found himself helpless in the face of this quality of her *kheyāl* and was reconciled to its acceptance. In great dejection he said, "Very well, I am not withholding my permission." After some time he said, "People will speak ill of you if you travel about alone without me."

"I shall not do anything", said Mataji, "which will invite criticism. My father will be with me. Will people speak ill of me ?" She looked enquiringly at her companions. Many hastened to re-assure her : "No Ma, nobody will say or think ill of you."

A car was sent for. But Mataji did not use it. She walked to the station with all the people. Many carried lanterns and torches. Sitanath wanted to go with her and she agreed to it. Bhaiji had been standing at the fringe of the crowd. He had not approached Mataji. After some time he and Bholanath with a few others came to the station. Many devotees, knowing that this parting would be very hard for Didi, said to Mataji, "Ma, take Didi with you." But she smilingly declined. Money was collected from those who had come to see her off. Mataji said that she would go to Mymensingh and put up with Bholanath's nephew, Kalipada. She had at first suggested the name of Ashu, but nobody knew his exact whereabouts. The train arrived. At the last moment, Bhaiji got into Mataji's compartment. She looked enquiringly at him. Bhaiji explained, "Baba (father—meaning Bholanath) has asked me to go with you." Mataji made no comment. The train sped away into the night, carrying Mataji to new places and new people.

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Mataji had not taken anything at all for herself, not even a change of clothes. The next day Shashanka Mohan took a couple of blankets and a change of clothes for her and went to Mymensingh. But he was not encouraged to stay or accompany her. He had to return to Dacca the same day. Mataji went on to Cox's Bazar and then to Mount Adinath, an island off the coast in the Bay of Bengal. After a week Bhaiji returned to Dacca to join his service. Ashu had come to Dacca on being informed that Mataji had made enquiries about him. Bholanath, learning from Bhaiji that Mataji was at Adinath, left immediately with Ashu to join her there. From Adinath they came on to Chandranath, another place of pilgrimage in Chattagram. Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta (the photographer) acted as an escort and guide for them at these places.

They then came to Calcutta to Bholanath's sister's place at Salkia. Mataji persuaded Bholanath to remain at Salkia with Sitanath, while she went on to Hardwar with her father and Ashu.

From Hardwar Mataji went to Dehra Dun and the springs at Sahasradhara. After a few days, she had a sudden *kheyāl* to proceed to Ayodhya, another holy place in Uttar Pradesh. She and Ashu were walking along the banks of the Ganges at that time. She asked Ashu to fetch their few belongings, and they started off towards the station without informing anybody. The probable reason for going quietly away like this was that Kunja Mohan had joined them in spite of Mataji's oft-expressed *kheyāl* to the contrary.

Mataji and Ashu did not know anything about Ayodhya. But they experienced no difficulty. The ticket collector at the

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Railway station came forward and invited them to his own house. Mataji did not stay long. For two days they roamed round the holy places in the town and then returned to Hardwar. Mataji went to the Ashram of Bholagiri Maharaj. Sri Gopinath Kaviraj was staying there. He now sent word to Dadamashai. Dadamashai knew that Ashu was with Mataji, so he had not worried too much about her but naturally he was now relieved to get news of her arrival in Hardwar. He and Kunja Mohan came to the Ashram and were glad to see Mataji's usual radiant smile. Kunja Mohan now fell ill and had to remain in Hardwar while Mataji proceeded to Varanasi.

At Varanasi Dadamashai caught fever. He was, therefore, left with Didi's sister and brother-in-law while Mataji started off with Ashu, Nani (Kunja Babu's fourth son) and Manik (a young student). Mataji had no particular destination in mind. Arriving at Moghalsarai, Nani said, "Let us go to Vindhyachal." Mataji agreed. In the meantime, Didi's sister and cousin, who had gone to Hardwar to fetch Kunja Mohan, returned to Varanasi and were greatly disappointed to find that Mataji had left. Taking a chance they came to Vindhyachal. They persuaded Mataji to go back to Varanasi.

Mataji expressed her *kheyāl* to stay at a place where nobody would recognize her. Kunja Mohan's eldest son escorted her to Calcutta and arranged for her to stay with his friend, Dr. Girin Mitra. Dr. Mitra had previously met Mataji at Pyari Banu's house.

Mataji had once been to Navadweep, a famous place of pilgrimage in Bengal, and had been taken to see a *sādhu* who was observing total silence. One day reference about this *sādhu* was made by someone at Dr. Mitra's house. This roused

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Mataji's *kheyāl* to go and see this *sādhu* again. Accordingly, they proceeded to Navadweep and put up at the *sādhu's aśrama*. Dr. Mitra left his widowed sister-in-law with Mataji and returned to Calcutta.

Mataji and her companion took up their abode in the verandah of the house. An old woman used to look after the *sādhu*. She did not like the idea of these two ladies staying on the premises. But Mataji assured her that they would not disturb her in any way. Girin Mitra's sister-in-law would prepare a few pieces of baked bread. Edible green leaves plucked or gathered from the courtyard sufficed for vegetable. The *sādhu* used to sit still like a statue, not even blinking his eyes. The attendant told everybody that he was a person of great spiritual achievement and that he did not move from his seat at all. On their previous visit, Bholanath and others had been of the opinion that it was a clay figure rather than a human being.

Gradually Mataji, in her own inimitable way, penetrated into the secret of the *sādhu*. He moved and ate secretly during the night. He confessed to her that he did not like the idea of duping the public, but the old woman had a hold on him and would not allow him to go away. Mataji talked to him for some time before coming away. Later on, it was reported to her that one morning the people of Navadweep were astonished to see the seat of the *sādhu* unoccupied and the *aśrama* vacated. Nobody knew when or where he had gone.

Mataji had the *kheyāl* to stay away from the towns where she was well-known. So, Dr. Mitra took her to his village

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home in Akna, Bihar. He did not inform the local people, otherwise a crowd would have collected round her in no time even in that place.

After some days Dr. Mitra* heard that Bholanath was not keeping good health. Bholanath had been on a pilgrimage to neighbouring *pīṭhasthānas*.† On becoming indisposed, he had gone to the Chandpur house of his nephew Dr. Girija Shankar Kushari. Dr. Mitra now informed Mataji about Bholanath's illness and escorted her to Calcutta. Bhaiji was in Calcutta at that time on official business. He arranged for Mataji to stay at the house of his friend Sri Gyan Sen. Kamalakanta was sent for from Dacca. Other devotees in Calcutta were informed about Mataji's return to the city. A wire was sent to Bholanath, who came to Calcutta and to Gyan Sen's house. He was quite displeased to have been left without information of Mataji's whereabouts. Mataji kept quiet, not trying to explain why she had moved about so erratically without plans and preparations.

From Gyan Sen's house Mataji and Bholanath went to Surendra Mohan Mukherji's residence. Surendra Mohan's mother had arranged for some *pūjā* at her house and had, accordingly brought sweets and fruits. It occurred to her that Mataji's presence in the house was in itself fulfilment of her *pūjā*. Now there was no need to offer formal *pūjā* to the deity. But could she hope to offer these sweets to Mataji ? For the last two years Mataji had not been taking any milk products and in any case she always ate next to nothing, so that the old lady had so far not been able to feed her at all. But

* For many years Major G. K. Mitra, generally known as Girinda, has been staying at the Sri Ma Anandamayi Ashram at Puri.

† See Glossary.

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now, Mataji said to her, "You always want to feed me with your hands. So far I have not been able to oblige you. To-day you can give me whatever you like." The old lady in great joy gave her curds, sweets and fruits procured for her *pūjā*. It is to be remembered that in India children are generally fed by hand till they are old enough to manipulate with their fingers.

This turned out to be this lady's last meeting with Mataji. She passed away soon after this incident.

Bholanath expressed his intention of going back to Chandpur. The devotees of Dacca, who were eagerly awaiting Mataji's return to the city, were disappointed to learn that she and Bholanath had gone to Chandpur, accompanied by Kamalakanta only.

Bhaiji, Shashanka Mohan and Nishikanta went to Chandpur to request Mataji and Bholanath to return to Dacca. They conveyed the prayers of the devotees, to which Mataji had nothing to say. Bholanath was a little undecided but agreed to return to Dacca after some time.

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Chapter Fifteen

BHOLANATH

Mataji and Bholanath returned to Dacca this time in an atmosphere of sadness. Niranjan Rai, who had taken the initiative in building the new Ashram at Ramna, had passed away on June 15, 1929, about a month after Mataji had left Dacca. He had taken his wife's death very much to heart. He would often slip away for many hours to the cremation ground. His friends were powerless to alleviate his sorrow. He had just one interest in life, namely the construction of the Ashram for Mataji at Ramna. Mataji had stayed for twentyfour hours only in this Ashram. Now that she returned to Dacca about three months after leaving it so abruptly, he was no more. Everyone was keenly aware of the tragedy of his death and his absence from their midst.

Bholanath and Mataji came to Ramna, but they did not occupy the new Ashram. Bholanath preferred to stay at Siddheshwari. Didima was with them and also Matori Pisima and little Maroni. They were accommodated in the house of Aswini Kumar, a devotee at Siddheshwari.

Mataji and Bholanath did not encourage the devotees of Dacca to visit or linger at Siddheshwari. Mataji did not look well. This was a novel feature because so far, even if physically ill, she had never seemed to be so. Didi and the others were very much concerned about Mataji's wan looks, but were not per mitted to do anything or even stay with them as in Shahbagh.

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Mataji now tried to cook meals with the help of Didima and Pisima, but was unable to do so. Mataji had said to Didi in Shahbagh one day in a different context, that human beings do not have to forsake anything wilfully. When the time comes all distractions fall away by themselves. Now when Mataji tried to help with the housework, she would not be able to clasp or hold things. Her hands uncoordinated like the hands of a child. She had, at one time, accomplished single-handed the entire work of a big family—the same hands were now powerless to do anything.

The reason for this change in Mataji's way of life was not understood by the devotees at that time. They were saddened at her withdrawn mood. Bholanath also seemed unusually aloof. They missed his easy camaraderie and were at a loss.

Since their marriage Bholanath had never interfered with Mataji's way of life or her movements. But during the last two months he had been advised by many members of his family to lead a normal life and not roam about like an ascetic or allow Mataji to do so. Bholanath probably did not altogether ignore this advice. He spoke to Mataji about it. What happened between them at that time was described by Mataji to Didi much later, that is, after Bholanath's death in 1938, as follows : "After almost three years Bholanath wanted me to cook his meals for him and look after his household as I used to do before. Do you remember, I tried to cook for a few days with mother's help at Siddheshwari ? I had no objection and it made no difference to me. I made an attempt as he asked me, but evidently it was not to be. Bbolanath fell ill after a few days and then I myself was ill. So it did not after all come to anything at all.

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"There never was any shadow of a worldly thought in Bholanath's mind. He made no difference between me and little Maroni when we lay near him at night. You will remember that many times when you were going away at night, you laid me down near him when this body was in a *bhāva*. He was never troubled by any self-consciousness. In Bajitpur, as well as in Shahbagh, he guarded and looked after this body most confidently and unself-consciously. Once or twice, when there was an inkling of a worldly thought in him which was so unformed as not to be on the level of his consciousness, this body would assume all the symptoms of death. He would feel frightened and do *japa*, knowing that he could re-establish contact with me by that method alone.

"Bholanath's self-control and sense of dignity were always extra-ordinary. I have never known him to make a light or frivolous remark or an improper joke. All the years I was with him I did not have an inkling of the desires which trouble mankind. I now realize how effectively shielded I was from the knowledge of weaknesses of character which creates so much unhappiness in the world. It is now that I hear so much about this side of human nature.

"Bholanath was very fond of his family also. At that time he came under the influence of his worldly-minded relations. He always had great faith in me, but he was at times blinded by his anger which clouded his judgment. But this mood of house-keeping lasted for a few days only."

Mataji said again, "All of you know that Bholanath was prone to fits of great anger. It is said that even *Ṛiṣis* (saints) were subject to the emotion of anger. Not that I am saying Bholanath was a *Ṛiṣi*. If I did, people would think I was prai-

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sing my husband. But you have all seen for yourselves that he led an extra-ordinary life of self-denial and rigorous asceticism."

Didi found this defence of Bholanath very charming. Mataji is so completely beyond the comprehension of even her most constant companions that these revelations of a compassionate understanding are eagerly treasured. This analysis of the situation at Siddheshwari is also very typical. Mataji emphasizes the good points only. At the same time, she never underscores the weaknesses or failings in her companions.

The conflict in Bholanath's mind was short-lived. While it lasted, Mataji looked very ill. Her normal glow and radiance vanished. She, moreover, observed silence although she would say one or two words to Bholanath and sometimes to the others in an indistinct voice. Nobody, however, knew the reason for this change in her demeanour.

After a few days, Bholanath was taken violently ill. Mataji kept a lonely vigil by his bed-side till people came to know about it. The devotees arranged for medical aid and took turns in nursing him. Mataji herself was in constant attendance. Bholanath was removed to Aswini Kumar's house for facility of treatment. Mataji, with Bholanath's permission, sometimes went to the Ashram and stayed in the room alone.

In the month of August, Mataji started running a temperature which developed into high fever within a few days. But a chart could not be maintained ; the temperature would suddenly shoot up to 106° and after a few moments come down to 100°. A little later, again the thermometer would record 104° or 105°, although there was no change in Mataji's

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outward appearance. With her illness Mataji appeared to have regained her cheerfulness. She would smile, talk and behave like a healthy person, even when she had very high fever. So, Didi and others stopped using the thermometer as serving no purpose. After a few days of the fever, Mataji's body became absolutely limp. She could not use any of her limbs and had to be picked up and carried. Even so, the smallest part of her body that was left unsupported would hang limp in a disjointed fashion. Bholanath now permitted Didi to stay at Siddheshwari to look after her. Aswini Babu's daughter Chana and other local people came to help Didi. It seemed like a stroke of paralysis, except that Mataji spoke and laughed in a normal manner. Mataji herself would say, "Why do you lift the body so carefully ? It has become like a bag of flour. You can shove it around." Didi in sheer desparation appealed to Mataji, "We are unable to look after your body in this condition. Please get well now."

One night Mataji lifted her hand without any aid. This was the first voluntary movement of her body after four or five days. The next day, she walked a little by herself and then slowly regained the use of her limbs. But the fever persisted and symptoms of dropsy began to appear besides blood dysentery. Her cheerfulness, however, remained unmarred. Bholanath thought that if she continued to enjoy her illness like this, she would never have the *kheyāl* to get well. So, he said with a show of impatience, "Illness is nothing to be so cheerful about. Get well now."

After Bholanath's scolding, Mataji's expression became that of a seriously ill patient. She would keep quiet and not talk to anyone. Many devotees from Dacca were now staying at night at Siddheshwari and the local people also were in cons-

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tant attendance. Siddheshwari was quite populated now. Housewives would leave their homes and gather round Mataji for long hours. If the devotees asked her to get well, she would say, "I don't ask you all to go away when you come. Why should I send away illnesses? They will leave in their own time."

Indeed, the diseases took their own reluctant time to go away from her. The fever continued for many days after the other symptoms had vanished.

A young boy named Atul had come in search of Jogeshdada from his village. Atter passing his Matriculation examination he had felt like following in Jogeshdada's footsteps. He now came to Siddheshwari and became one of Mataji's ever-increasing family. He was given the task of cooking *bhoga* and looking after the image of Kālī.

It may be recalled that the image of Kālī and the sacrificial fire had to be moved from time to time with every change of place of installation. Sometime after the Kālīpūjā in 1926, a hollow was made under Mataji's instructions, near the pond in Shahbagh. After consecration of the ground, the sacrificial fire was established in this *kuṇḍa*. Kulada Banerji, a new-comer at that time, was put in charge of this *yajña-kuṇḍa*. He was temperamentally suited for these forms of *pūjā*. For many years he remained in charge of Kālī and the *yajña-agni* in Dacca.

At Siddheshwari, the fire had been placed under the *peepul* tree. Mataji did not permit it to be taken to any home. Whenever necessary, she gave suitable instructions for its preservation and maintenance.

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The devotees were now desirous of establishing the image of Kālī and the *agni* at the Ramna Ashram permanently.

Mataji suggested that the Goddess Kālī may be installed where a broken *Śiva-linga* had been found. A pit of the sacrificial fire was also constructed according to Mataji's instructions.

Meanwhile, the devotees wanted to enlarge the Ashram at Ramna. Nagen Babu took charge of the building programme. Several graves were uncovered when the earth was dug up for laying the foundation. Some were in a good condition of preservation. Skeletons, ashes from sacrificial fires and earthen lamps were disinterred. People now recalled what Mataji had said about this site, namely, that many ascetics had lived there and practised *sādhanā* in the past.

At Mataji's *kheyāl*, the graves were left undisturbed. Three of the main *samādhis* came below theb ig room of the Ashram. Another became the foundation of the Śiva temple, yet others were under Mataji's room.

On *Mahālayā*, 1331 B.S., that is sometime in October 1929, Mataji and Bholanath came to Ramna. Both were ailing and confined to bed for several days. It took a long time for Mataji to get back to her normal behaviour. Once for 15 days she hardly left her bed. She would get up for a few minutes only, otherwise she would lie or sit in her bed all the time. One day, Bhaiji came early in the morning and persuaded her to take a walk in the Ramna Polo grounds. This started off another reaction. She began walking for three or four hours every day.

One morning she did not get up at all. Two days passed, Mataji remained lying inert on her bed. Bholanath was at

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his wit's end. He assembled the devotees for a *kīrtana* which was kept up throughout the night. The next afternoon, Mataji sat up and slowly resumed her activities of daily life. She would say in answer to inquiries, "This inert condition is the same to me as an active condition. I feel no difference whatsoever, so what is there to explain ?"

During this time Mataji in her own unobtrusive way brought about a major change in Bholanath's life. Bholanath was not indifferent to creature comforts. He had a soft and comfortable bed, whereas Mataji had a blanket only. One night Mataji roused Bholanath from his fine bed and expressed a *kheyāl* to recline on it. Bholanath being deprived of his bed had to roll up some clothes to serve as a pillow and use Mataji's blanket for the night's rest.

After a few days Mataji rolled up Bholanath's elaborate bedding and had it put away. She took another blanket for herself.

Mataji's reputation was spreading day by day. Many came to talk to her about their personal problems or just to discuss philosophical questions. The Indian Philosophical Congress was held in Dacca in 1929. Some of the delegates came to see Mataji and had a long talk with her with the help of a translator, because at that time she did not know Hindi. One of the delegates asked her, "If the human character changes and everybody becomes unselfish, will the world then become perfect ?" She at once replied with a smile, "But such it is already." It was evident to the delegates that she was speaking from the standpoint of her experience in which everything is the perfect expression of the perfect Being.

Dr. Mahendra Nath Sircar, recalling the same meeting,

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writes, "All the delegates assembled in Ma's house. A professor of the Wilson College led the discussion that lasted for three hours. All sorts of questions were put, mostly philosophical and. Mataji was ready with answers spontaneously and immediately. There was no hesitatiou, not the least conscious thinking, nor the least sign of nervousness in her. Her answers hit directly the point, free from metaphysical technique"—He added that all who were present were impressed by "the profundity of her wisdom, the fluency of her expression and the luminosity of the smile on her face."

In the beginning of 1930, Mataji asked Bholanath to practise his *sādhanā* at Siddheshwari. Atul or some other young *brahmachārī* would stay at night at Siddheshwari with him, to look after his needs, if any. Otherwise he was practically alone. Here also, as in Tarapeeth, he attained the capacity of deep concentration. He would sit for hours together in one posture. Some of the *brahmachārīs* took spiritual initiation from him at this time.

The *panchavaṭī* at Ramna was planted by Bholanath. It is usually a grove of five trees, namely, banyan, *peepul*, *āmalokī*, *aśoka* and *bela*. A *panchavaṭi* is considered to be conducive to meditation and, therefore, a good place for *sādhanā*. Bholanath had obtained from within himself the *mantras* for planting each tree and was altogether in an exalted condition at the time of the ceremonies. When the saplings were unpacked it was seen that the *aśoka* tree had no ball of earth to protect its root. Somebody remarked: "Probably this won't survive." Bholanath, overhearing this, said forcefully, "Of course, it will survive. It cannot die."

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After a few days, this particular sapling dried up completely. Kamalakanta, whose foolhardiness earned him many reprimands from Bholanath, uprooted it and threw it aside. Bholanath on his next visit to Ramna from Siddheshwari was furious to see the uprooted plant. He put the dead sapling again in its original place saying, "It cannot die."

A few days later, Mataji, while strolling near the *pancha vaṭī*, said, "Look here, you can do one thing. Bring a fresh sapling and plant it together with this one." Strange as it may seem, this novel treatment revived the dry tree, and within a few days both saplings began to throw out green shoots and became healthy-looking plants.

Mataji's birthday celebrations of 1930 were held at the Ramna Ashram and the *pūjā* was performed in the *panchavaṭī*. A small platform had been constructed for Mataji in the middle of the enclosure. Bholanath came to Ramna to perform the *pūjā*.

Shortly after the birthday celebrations, Mataji remarked one day, "I hear the sound of weeping from every house." This prophecy became an actuality within a few days. The communal riots in June 1930 brought about a reign of terror. Curfew was clamped on the city. For sometime, nobody dared to stir out of their homes. Only Bhaiji came daily to the Ashram as usual. His neighbour told him one day, "I watch you passing by everyday and I cannot rest until I see you return. This has become almost a vigil with me now."

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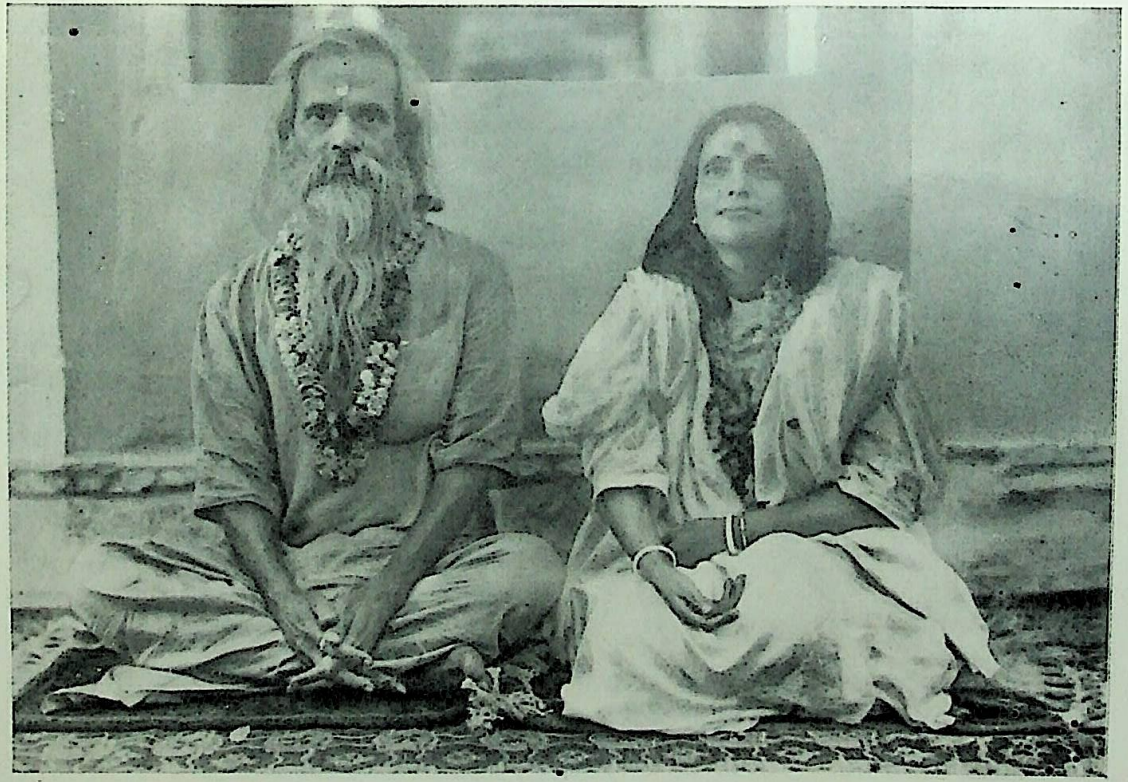

Bholanath and Mataji

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Chapter Sixteen

THE WIDENING CIRCLE

The devotees of Dacca were becoming accustomed to Mataji's frequent absence from Ramna.

In August 1930, Mataji and Bholanath, accompanied by Didi, Shashanka Mohan, Jogeshdada, Ashu and a few others, started on a tour of South India. They spent three or four days in Waltair and from there went to Madras, where they stopped for about a week. Then they visited Chidambaram, Srirangam, Kanchipuram and Madurai. They stayed for a week in Rameshvaram and for about fifteen days in Kanya Kumarika.

The beautiful temple of Devī Kumārī captivated their hearts. In the evening, young girls from the families of priests sang and danced inside the temple. Mataji had picked up one or two words of their language. They sometimes came to the *dharmaśālā* to sing for Mataji. They would hold hands and make a ring around her. At Mataji's *kheyāl*, the priests and these young girls were entertained to *bhoga* on two days. The children were each given a set of clothes, garlands and sandalwood.

When Mataji was about to leave, the little girls stood around her and tried to talk to her. But the barrier of language was insurmountable. Mataji and the girls communicated for a while by gestures alone.

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Shashanka Mohan had a wonderful experience in the temple of Kumarika. One day, when sitting in meditation inside the temple, he was suddenly impelled to open his eyes. He saw a small beautiful girl standing inside the door. As soon as he looked at her, she retreated into the inner temple. He was greatly surprised because no girl had entered the inner temple. He kept on gazing at her while she was moving backwards till she reached the image of the Deity. Then she vanished and he saw her no more. Shashanka Babu was a very reticent person. It is not known what exactly of this incident meant for him. It was related by him many years later.

After Kumarika they visited Trivandrum and Mangalore and proceeded to Dwarka *via* Bombay.

Mataji took keen interest in all the temples and cities they passed through. She noted the different dresses, customs and appearances of people belonging to the various provinces. She would point out to her companions the peculiarities of different temples with regard to their architecture as well as the ritualistic observations. She would note the different styles of decoration in different temples. People were attracted by her radiant personality. Although she could not speak their language, she found no difficulty in establishing contact with them. She was completely at home in all these new places.

Just before the annual Durgā-pūjā in October 1930, they arrived at Vindhyachal from Dwarka. Many devotees from Varanasi had come to Vindhyachal. A small building had been purchased on the top of the Ashtabhuja hill by Shashanka Mohan and Durgā-pūjā was performed at this site. The lonely surroundings came to life. The whole neighbourhood rang with

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the sounds of conch shells and bells, *kīrtana* and the play and laughter of children.

From Vindhyachal, Mataji proceeded to many other places and then went to Jamshedpur.

Jogeshdada's younger brother, Krishna Chandra, was working in Jamshedpur and he had made arrangements for Mataji and her party. Krishna Chandra had organised a *kīrtana* during which, after quite an interval, Mataji had beautiful *bhāvas*. Jamshedpur is an iudustrial town. The people were not particularly interested in religion; in fact, many of them had never before heard of a *kīrtana*. This *kīrtana*, which centred round Mataji, opened up for them a vista of a world wonderful in its possibilities.

Next day, Krishna Chandra's house was teeming with visitors. Till 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, people would sit surrounding Mataji and listen to her talk. After Mataji left for Calcutta, the people of Jamshedpur formed a *kīrtana* party. They organised themselves trying to keep up the atmosphere created by Mataji's visit. They would meet in one house every week to perform *kīrtana* and to talk about Mataji. To this day, the organisation formed by them is doing commendable work. Many of them took initiation from Bholanath later on. Mataji does not visit Jamshedpur as often as she visits other towns, yet the devotees with mutual help and goodwill keep up a good standard of *satsang*.

In Calcutta, the number of devotees now was legion. Jyotish Guha and his two brothers Nitish and Kshitish, who had recently become Mataji's ardent devotees, had a house at Ballygunj. They converted one big room of their house into

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a *pūjā*-room, where *kīrtana* was performed on many occasions. The entire family could sing well and the family group itself would be a *kīrtana* party. The devotees of Calcutta made this house a sort of headquarters for news of Mataji when she was away from Calcutta.

Joytish Guha's father-in-law, Pran Kumar, and his wife became devoted to Mataji. A more devout couple dedicated to the service of Mataji would be difficult to find. At their invitation, Mataji went to Pabna for a few days.

A young *sādhu* had attached himself to the throng of devotees. One day, a woman came to Mataji in Calcutta and introduced herself as the *sādhu's* wife. She begged Mataji to persuade her husband to return home. Mataji did so.

"If you want to follow the path of renunciation," she said to the *sādhu*, "go home and talk it over with your family. Your decision should be acceptable to them." But on arrival in Pabna, Mataji found that the *sādhu* had accompanied the big party of people from Calcutta. She did not say anything more to him.

Pran Kumar joyfully welcomed the entire party and took great pains to look after their comforts. Days and nights slipped away like short-lived dreams. Mataji one day entered the store-room of the house and brought out baskets of fruits which had been stored for the use of Mataji's party. Amidst general merriment, Mataji distributed all the fruits saying, "Hoarding is bad. One should be content with things as they come or are available".*

* Pran Kumar's widow or Bunidi's Didima, as she is known to devotees, is now living in the Ashram at Varanasi.

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The *sādhu* now fell ill. Pran Kumar arranged for medical treatment. He was left in Pran Kumar's care when Mataji left for Cox's Bazar. Mataji had come once before to Cox's Bazar. This time one Dinabandhu Chakravarty invited Mataji to his house and made arrangements for her stay in his sea-side bungalow.

A few days later, Didi found Mataji making a hollow in the sand of the beach. In anwer to her question Mataji said, "I am digging my grave (*samādhi*)." Didi drew Mataji's hand away and took her back to the bungalow. A couple of days after this incident, a message was received from Pabna to the effect that the *sādhu*, who had been left behind at Pran Kumar's house, had passed away. He had died on the day Mataji was digging a hollow in the sand at Cox's Bazar. In this way sometimes Mataji gave indications of incidents taking place far away. *Sādhus* are buried and not cremated. As related earlier, Mataji also experienced the breaking of the arm of Kālī at Dacca, during her stay in Cox's Bazar on this occasion.

After about six months, Mataji returned to Dacca. At this time they received news of Bholanath's fourth brother, Kamini Kumar, from a devotee in Calcutta. It will bc recalled that nobody knew about his whereabouts for over twenty years. He was known to have adopted Christianity and was a clergyman. It transpired that he was living in Calcutta. He had heard about Mataji and wanted to meet his family. He had gone to the house of Charu Ghosh to get news of his brother and sister-in-law.

Bholanath was very pleased with this information. He immediately went to Calcutta with Mataji and Ashu to meet his brother and his family.

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Reverend K. K. Chakravarty (as Kamini Kumar was called now) and his wife became very attached to Mataji. They came to Dacca after some time and met Mataji's large family of devotees.

In Ramna Ashram

In the evening, Mataji would stroll in the extensive green fields of the polo grounds surrounding the Ashram. The men would stand about or sometimes sit on the grass and have discourses on philosophical topics with Mataji. One day, a gentleman said to her, "You were lying in a state of *samādhi*. You were evidently in communion with God. Now you have to descend to our level and talk to us for our benefit."

"Are you all apart from God ?" Mataji smiled, and said, "I do not see any ascending or descending. To me it is all the same. Only the bodily reactions seem to be different."

The annual birthday celebrations of 1931 drew near. It was decided to install the images of Śiva, Annapūrṇā and Viṣṇu in the newly constructed temple in the Ramna Ashram. As written above, the image of Kālī had been repaired under Mataji's instructions and installed again in its original place.

The birthday celebrations started with great entuhsiasm among the devotees. Many arrived from Calcutta and other towns nearby. One day Mataji said, "Why should *kīrtana* be sung by men only ? We, women, shall keep awake one night and sing *kīrtana*." Her suggestion was carried out with so much enthusiasm and success that when other ladies heard about it, they asked to be allowed to arrange for another night-long *kīrtana*. The ladies were not free during the day.

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But in the evening, nearly 150 of them collected for this purpose. Mataji asked all the men to go home. She nominated a few elderly men like Shashanka Mohan to act as guards as the function would have to be in the open. It was typical of Mataji to make proper arrangements and take all precautions against any untoward incident.

The women decorated themselves with flowers, garlands and sandal-wood paste. The fragrance of incense permeated the atmosphere. Quite a few among the ladies were good musicians and had a beautiful voice. They made the night melodious by their inspired singing. This was how in Dacca has formal *kīrtana* party of women which acquired such proficiency and fame later on. It encouraged the ladies in other towns to form similar parties. At that time, it was an unheard of event for ladies to stay in an *aśrama* among strangers for a night-long function. But impossible things were made possible by Mataji.

The birthday celebrations of 1931 were concluded amidst an atmosphere of great festivity and rejoicing. It was an occasion for many people to come together and become, as it were, members of one large family. The devotees of Dacca welcomed the devotees coming from outside. Bholanath's brother, Rev. K. K. Chakravarty, came with his family and was introduced to everyone. In keeping with the Indian custom, he came to be known as '*Kākābābu*' or uncle. Atal Bihari and his wife from Rajshahi, Jyotish Guha and his entire family, Pramoda Debi's family from Salkia and many others arrived to create an atmosphere of family reunion. The red brick-building of the Ashram was surrounded on all sides by the vast greenery of the Ramna polo grounds. The devotees no doubt congratulated themselves on having at least secured a place, fit

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for Mataji and her ever-increasing congregation of devotees, not knowing that Mataji would leave it for good the next year.

After the birthday celebrations of 1931, Mataji left Dacca for Dārjeeling. On her way she visited Bajitpur. Many of the ladies, who had come to see her off, at the last moment climbed into cars and joined Mataji's party, amidst much laughter and teasing that they would be considered mad by their people and severely taken to task when they returned home. But nobody was willing to think so far ahead, and adventurously went along with Mataji's party to Bajitpur. (Incidentally, it may be recorded that such last-minute augmentation of Mataji's party is not a rare phenomenon. The truth of the matter is that nobody finds it easy to tear oneself away from Mataji's presence and everyone experiences this wrench. So, the impulsive ones were not taken to task by their families).

A tide of festivity passed over Bajitpur for a couple of days with the arrival of the cheerful throng of devotees. Mataji pointed out old landmarks. Her cottage was there, but its roof had fallen in and the walls were crumbling. From the local people who collected round them, Didi and others heard accounts of Mataji's life during that time. The girl who used to work for Mataji came and stood near them shyly. She was so happy to see Mataji again. Didi collected a little of the earth from the corner of the room where Mataji used to sit during her *līlā* of *sādhanā*. This was subsequently placed under the platform of the *panchavaṭī* at Ramna.

The impromptu party returned to Dacca, while Mataji, with her usual companions, went on to Darjeeling. They did not know anybody there and were sitting at the station, discussing where to go, when they were suddenly accosted by Biren

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Maharaj, an old acquaintance. He was overjoyed to see Mataji, and took them to his house. From Darjeeling Mataji came to Calcutta.

After visiting various places they came to Puri to attend the annual festival of *Ratha-yātrā*.

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Chapter Seventeen

THE LAST YEAR IN DACCA, 1931

Ratha-yātrā or pulling of the chariot of Jagannath is an annual festival held at Puri. Many friends and devotees had come with Mataji to join in this festival. A few days before the *Ratha-yātrā,* Mataji said, "I see an impending calamity. Do what you can."

Bholanath conjectured that some sort of accident would occur during the great rush hour of the festival and wanted to leave Puri at once, but his companions were eager to see the *Ratha-yātrā,* and so he was persuaded to stay back. Nirmal Chandra, Didi's brother-in-law, who had come with his family from Varanasi, left after staying for a few days with Mataji. But his eldest son, Santosh, and his daughter, Tarubala, remained at Puri because the boy wanted to be with Mataji's party. Mataji said, "Are they staying back? In that case, all of you must look after them." The mother of Santosh, however, told Mataji that she was entrusting her son and daughter to Mataji's care. There was reason for some concern about Santosh. He was subject to epileptic fits and had to be watched constantly. A week passed. Then one day, Santosh was found to be missing. After a frantic search, his dead-body was discovered in the well behind the house. The shock of this discovery nearly paralysed everybody. Only Mataji remained sitting quietly in her room. Bholanath, Shashanka Mohan, Santosh's grand-father and others brought the body to the house. Mataji's calm demeanour had

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a salutary effect on them. Many persons who had come to visit Mataji were on the point of turning back at the gate, thinking it would be improper to intrude on her grief. When they were told that Mataji was her normal serene self, they took heart and went in to see her.

Death by accident is, in some cases, considered inauspicious. In such a case, the body is sometimes not cremated but has to be buried. Apart from the tragedy of death, this was an additional problem that had to be faced. The local people rallied to their help, and with the permission of the *paṇḍits* the body was cremated.

Throughout the day Mataji sat quietly attending to people, as they came, with no sign of perturbation. Late at night, she talked about Santosh to Didi and Tarubala, who were sitting up with her. Throughout the night she spoke of nothing else. Didi and Taru, who had considered Mataji quite beyond their level of worldly feelings, were vouchsafed a glimpse of a heart overflowing with compassion and sympathy for the bereaved.

The next day at dawn, Mataji went to the well, trying to reconstruct the actions of Santosh. He had been intelligent enough to know that he was not supposed to go near wells because of disability. Why he went there remained a mystery.

On the night of the *Ratha-yātrā*, Mataji and her companions left Puri and went to Vindhyachal. While at Vindhyachal, Mataji came to know that an unexpected hitch had occurred regarding the *śrāddha* of Santosh. The *paṇḍits* of Varanasi had refused to perform the *śrāddha* ceremony, which

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is held on the 13th day after death. Mataji now took the matter in her own hands. She sent telegrams to Puri and to many of her companions at Varanasi repeatedly. After prolonged consultation between the *paṇḍits* of Varanasi and Puri, the former gave them permission for the ceremony to be performed as usual. Without Mataji's personal intervention, the bereaved parents would have been denied the solace of performing the last rites of the departed soul.

Jyotish Guha's family from Calcutta was with Mataji. At their request Mataji accompanied them to Varanasi. The day on which she arrived at the house of Nirmal Chandra happened to be the day of the *śrāddha* of Santosh. Nirmal Chandra greeted Mataji with composure, saying, "Ma, I gave you two of my children. I see, you have given sanctuary to one of them." Mataji looked at his calm face and started weeping in a touching manner. Santosh's mother, who was crying silently, now took Mataji like a child in her arms and tried to console and quieten her.

Mataji stayed with them for another 15 days. It did not appear that this was a house of mourning. Santosh's parents were busy looking after Mataji and the cheerful throng that always surrounded her, wherever she went. One day the bereaved father asked her, "Ma, why did you cry on the first day?" Mataji answered, "Because you did not. I wept to lighten the burden weighing on your heart."

From Varanasi Mataji again returned to Vindhyachal. One day, from the verandah of the Ashram, Mataji saw some men climbing the hill. They were carrying some refreshments with them and were evidently on an all-day expedition to various places of interest on Ashtabhuja hill. On arriving at

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the hill-top, they hid their basket under a bush and went away. Mataji asked Didi to fetch the refreshments. On their return, the gentlemen were non-plussed to find their *cache* missing. After a few moments Mataji sent someone to invite them to the Ashram. They were highly pleased that Mataji had taken away their food and congratulated themselves on getting her *darśana* in this unexpected manner. One of them, Dr. Upendranath Banerji of Mirzapur, invited her to his place. The next day, he came with his wife to renew his invitation. Mataji thus visited Mirzapur and then paid a short visit to Ayodhya before returning to Dacca.

Mataji was gradually effecting significant changes in the lives of many of her close companions. Shashanka Mohan in his old age was acquiring new habits and learning to do without many comforts of everyday life.

Mataji had some time back obtained a *kamaṇḍalu* (water vessel made of a pumpkin carried by *sannyāsīs*) which she had given to Didi to keep for her. This *kamaṇḍalu* had been taken to Siddheshwari, but thereafter Didi forgot all about it. One day, in Siddheshwari she was suddenly reminded of it. She went to ask the *bhairavī* of the Kālī temple about the *kamaṇḍalu* because in their absence the *bhairavī* used to look after the premises. When Didi came near the temple, she saw a man swimming in the pond. As she approached the pond, the man brought out a blackish object which had struck his foot. He asked if it belonged to anyone. Didi recognised the *kamaṇḍalu* which had come back to her in this accidental manner and almost as soon as she had thought of it. Mataji subsequently got it cleaned and kept it by her bedside. She would drink water from it. One day Shashanka Mohan and others were discussing the advantage of drink-

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ing water from a receptacle with curved edges from which water can be poured into the mouth without the lips touching the vessel. Shashanka Mohan said, "I cannot do it. I can only drink from a glass." Mataji promptly handed him the *kamaṇḍalu*, saying : "Try to drink water from this from now on." Shashanka Mohan accepted the gift and with great perseverance acquired proficiency in the art of drinking from a *kamaṇḍalu*. In this slow but steady fashion Mataji was carving out new ways of living for Shashanka Mohan and Didi and many others. Shashanka Mohan had almost become an inmate of the Ashram. In his old age, he started practising rigorous *sādhanā*, beyond the capacity of even younger people. He would sit still for about eight to ten hours in deep meditation. He was the head of a large joint family, almost a clan. He discharged his duties but was slowly becoming unattached to the claims of this family.

Perhaps it will not be out of place to mention an incident which occurred much later. Shashanka Mohan was a taciturn man. His stern expression, however, disguised a keen sense of humour. He would sit quietly in one corner of a room, while Mataji talked to visitors. One day Mataji, in the course of conversation, referred a point to him for clarification. When he did not answer, the entire congegration turned around to look at him. Shashanka Mohan said to Mataji, "I am sorry, I did not realise that Mataji was speaking to me—I am so used to being overlooked by her now." Then he added with a faint smile, "No good mother has any time for grown up children who can fend for themselves."

Wherever he was, poor people would come to him for medical aid. Although he did not practise his profession after leaving Dacca, he generally kept a supply of medicines

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for indigent villagers, and he was always accessible. He was a source of great strength and support to Bholanath. As in his own family, so also in this new family which was knit together by spiritual ties, he was like a revered elder.

Mataji was constantly on the move. At the invitation of devotees she visited various towns and villages. After the annual Kālī-pūjā of 1931, she went to Cox's Bazar and stayed at the sea-side bungalow of Dinabandhu for more than one month. Dinabandhu's wife expressed a desire to visit some holy places. Although now quite old, she had not travelled at all. Mataji persuaded Dinabandhu to bring the entire family with her to Calcutta. From there a huge party of devotees went with Mataji and Bholanath to Tarapeeth for one day. Mataji also went to Varanasi and Vindhyachal accompanied by Dinabandhu's wife, and then proceeded to Jamshedpur. The devotees of Jamshedpur had organised themselves for looking after the comforts of Mataji and her whole party. Everyone wanted Mataji to grace his house with her presence. They themselves made arrangements for these visits and prepared a list of houses and the order of procedure. At every home Mataji found people awaiting her with offerings of fruits, flowers and other gifts in accordance with their personal preferences. Didi, knowing that people were disappointed if Mataji did not eat what they had to offer, fed her a little more than her usual quantity. When the visits were over, Mataji asked Didi gravely, "You have fed me more than I usually eat, haven't you?"

Didi answered : "Ma, people do not believe that you eat as little as you do. They think I do not give you enough food ; they suspect that I am not in favour of your taking food at all the places to which you are invited. So I have tried to give you a reasonable amount at each house."

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Mataji answered, "You should do your duty regardless of what people may think of you. If you are influenced by praise or blame, how can you keep your mind on your duty?" Didi was remorseful because in order to please devotees she had failed in her duty of serving Mataji.

From Jamshedpur Mataji returned to Dacca in the beginning of the year 1932. Crowds of people would come to the station to see her off and to receive her. Mataji stayed at Ramna for a few months this time. Shashanka Mohan and Didi were at Siddheshwari. Didi would come early in the morning and leave late at night with her father. Shashanka Mohan used to rise before dawn and sit down for his meditation. He would get up for a few minutes in the afternoon. At about 6 in the evening he would go to Ramna and take *prasāda*. After returning, he would again sit in meditation till 2 or 3 a. m. He would rest for an hour or so and then it was another day for him. Some nights he would not rest at all. One night, while sitting in meditation he had a vision of Mataji at Ramna. He saw her coming out of her room and then going back after a few moments. It was just midnight. Next day he asked Bholanath if Mataji had gone out of the room at night. Bholanath answered, "Yes, at midnight, for a few moments."

In the month of April 1932, Mataji came to Calcutta after visiting many places round about Dacca. This time she stayed with Kakababu's (Bholanath's Christian brother) family. Days and nights merged into one another. The unending stream of people eager to have a glimpse of Mataji did not allow her a single moment's rest. Kakababu and others decided to fix definite times for *darśana*. At noon everybody was requested to leave so that Mataji could relax for a little while.

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Swami Akhandananda (Shashanka Mohan)

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After people had reluctantly gone, Mataji was asked to rest in one of the inner rooms which was cool. April is a hot month. The sun was blazing mercilessly and in the open the heat was quite unbearable. Bholanath, Kakababu and others were occupying another room. After a short while Mataji got up with a mischievous look on her face. She came to the room where the men were enjoying their siesta, and asked Kakababu to come out for a walk with her. Kakababu protested, "Now, what all is this? I sent away everybody so that you could rest, and you are going out in this scorching heat! What will people think of me?" Mataji did not listen to his protests. She smiled and said, "Don't you know that there is something wrong with my brain? Alas, I am disturbing your rest also." Mataji roamed around, sometimes stopping at shops to bargain for some articles. In this manner she arrived at the house of Pashupati Babu. His wife was ill and had not been able to visit Mataji, so she was overwhelmed with joy because she had been praying deeply for Mataji's *darśana.*

In the evening, Mataji returned to Kakababu's house. At 9 p.m. Kakababu again requested people to leave. He was determined to ensure Mataji's rest, at least during the night. But he had reckoned without Mataji. She stayed awake with the result that her companions could not sleep either. People who have seen Mataji will know that it is not possible for anybody to tear himself away from her presence unless compelled to do so. When Kakababu protested, she started teasing him in the manner of a privileged elder sister-in-law. The whole night was spent in this hilarious and wakeful manner. The next morning the devotees heard how Mataji had 'rested' during the day and night. Kakababu gave up his attempt at organising Mataji's programme.

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Didi recalls an interesting incident which occurred at his place. Kakababu's wife, Kakima, was a Punjabi lady, very proud of her athletic figure and physical strength. She would say that she was more than a match for any Bengali girl. In friendly trials of strength she would defeat Didi and others. Mataji one day playfully caught hold of her arm with three fingers only. Much to the amusement of all, Kakima was unable to loosen this slender hold on her arm.

From Calcutta Mataji went to Atal Bihari's house at Rajshahi. At night, Mataji and her party were invited to a *kīrtana* at a neighbour's house. Atal Bihari stayed at home. On her return Mataji found that Atal Bihari had retired for the night. He got up when his guests returned. Mataji said, "You are a fine person. Your guests have not dined as yet and you have had your food and are sleeping comfortably." Atal Bihari said, "A mother is satisfied if her son is well fed and rested. My dinner should suffice for you." Mataji said, "Indeed! All right, don't forget what you have said now." When some light refreshments were brought for Mataji, she pushed the dish in front of Atal, saying, "It should suffice for me if Atal eats. Let him eat this." Atal smiled and polished off the plate. Mataji then said, "I do not need to lie down because Atal's rest will be my rest." Atal answered, "All right, you can sit up. I am going to sleep", and with that he marched away to his bed.

The next morning Mataji said, "Atal's stay in the house will be my stay. Let us now go somewhere else." Mataji, accompanied by Didi, Atal's wife and others walked to a riverside temple nearby. Mataji said, "Cook the mid-day meal over here." Bholanath and Shashanka Mohan fetched the necessary commodities from the market. Didi and Atal's wife

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cooked a simple meal in the open, consisting of rice and *dāhl* cooked together with vegetables, and a sweet dish of milk with rice *(kheer)*. When the meal was ready, Didi poured a little of the *kheer* into a glass and offered it to Mataji. After swallowing the first mouthful, Mataji asked Didi to taste a little of the *kheer*. Didi obeyed, but had to spit it out immediately because it was still scalding hot. Mataji's smile somewhat lessened her discomfiture and remorse. Atal Bihari's wife said, "I have also learnt my lesson. Very often I offer hot things for *bhoga*, not bothering to ascertain whether they are fit to be eaten or not."*

Mataji then returned to the house of her host. It was not in her nature to walk away with a victory over Atal Bihari. So she went back to relieve him of his anxiety and remorse at carrying his playfulness too far. Mataji returned to Dacca a few days before the birthday anniversary of 1932.

* Mataji even now frequently suffers from this sort of service from companions. It must be said on behalf of the people who serve her that it is difficult for them to judge whether Mataji is comfortable or not because her equanimity remains undisturbed even under the gravest provocations.

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Chapter Eighteen

FAREWELL TO DACCA, 1932

Bhaiji had been asked to arrange for the remodelling of the deities in the temple at Ramna Ashram. They were made out of an alloy of eight metals and beautifully executed. Mataji had already donated a major portion of her ornaments and the gold was used for this purpose. Mataji used to receive a lot of jewellery from her devotees and relatives, but she never kept anything for herself for long. For many years she had worn only a thin gold chain given her by Bholanath. In deference to convention she kept one pair of conch-shell bangles on her arms and a gold-plated iron bangle worn by all married women of Bengal. She still wears this single bangle, a gift from Srimati Vinodini Devi.

This time the birthday celebrations continued for 21 days and during the entire period uninterrupted *kīrtana* was kept up together with other religious functions.

As in previous years, devotees flocked to Dacca. Day and night the small red building amidst the green expanse of the polo grounds swarmed with men, women and children. On this occasion yet another facet of Mataji's personality was revealed. It was she who with unerring judgement advised how to accommodate the large number of visitors and also how to keep them usefully occupied. Now that the devotees had gathered at one place, she suggested the celebration of various religious festivals. Everyone would joyfully take part in them. She was everywhere at once, advi-

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sing, taking decisions and making suggestions wherever help was needed. The high light of the occasion was the installation of the deities in the various temples. Under Mataji's instructions Bholanath performed all the necessary rituals.

As mentioned earlier, a platform had been constructed covering the hollow at Siddheshwari temple. At this time a *Śivaliṅgam* was installed on this platform at Mataji's suggestion. It was no longer possible for anybody to use it as a seat or in any other way.

Mataji continually received offerings of flowers, sweets, clothes, ornaments and money and untiringly she would go on distributing these amongst the people around her. This distribution of gifts is a singular feature of Mataji's personality. She never by mistake returns a present to the donor. Even after years she can tell the name of a person who has given her a particular gift. Didi and her other companions are frequently at a loss to know how to accommodate this mountain of offerings which accumulates wherever Mataji happens to be. But Mataji always finds suitable recipients for every kind of article ranging from a priceless gold embroidered velvet carpet, or a sandalwood throne, to cheap oddments. Incidently, the monetary worth of an item is the least important aspect for Mataji's consideration. She tries to find a suitable place or person for every present she receives. To everything she devotes the same degree of care and concern. Wherever Mataji is, there is an abundance of goods. But she never encourages neglect, wastage or even taking of things for granted. This appreciation of even slight pecuniary offerings, or, for that matter, physical or spiritual efforts, is Mataji's own peculiar characteristic.

Throughout twenty-four hours Mataji used to be surround-

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ed by large numbers of devotees. Yet she found time to instruct the *brahmachārīs* of the Ashram in detail concerning the worship of the newly installed deities, and regarding the maintenance of the sacred fire. There are methods of preserving fire under ashes for some time. Knowledge of such rituals was spontaneous with Mataji. That it was correct and in accordance with strictly religious rules was borne out later when she came into contact with *paṇḍits* at Varanasi at the time of the *Mahāyajña**. Necessary guidance was given by Mataji to the person immediately concerned whenever the occasion would arise. At the same time each individual received personal instruction from her concerning his spiritual life. Mataji had such an easy way of accomplishing her object that there was no fuss or ceremony about these matters. She would not disclose to anybody else the advice she would give to any particular person. Mataji would say, "The efforts you make for your spiritual welfare are to be carefully hidden. Guard them as closely as a miser guards his wealth. You do not have to advertise the fact that you are engaged in *sādhanā*. It is between God and you only. Do not neglect your duties at home or at your place of work. You may do your work with your hands, but nobody can prevent you from keeping your mind on God." Mataji was always in the midst of a crowd of devotees and admirers and did not apparently single out anybody for individual attention. Yet, after Mataji had left Dacca, the devotees realized that she had not forgotten anything or anyone. As occasions arose they found themselves fortified by Mataji's instructions. At the time of the festival, however, nobody could guess that Mataji was about to leave them very soon.

* See Glossary.

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Towards the close of the prolonged celebrations, Mataji was one day invited to the house of a devotee whose daughter was getting married. This could have brought about the *kheyāl* for little Maroni's future. On her return to the Ashram, Mataji sent for Bholānath and talked to him for some time. After this she conversed with Kulada Charan and his wife. A little later Mataji went to the *pañchavaṭī*, asking everybody to join her. Kulada Charan, his wife and their elder son Chinu were present. Bholanath came with little Maroni, decked in silk clothes and ornaments. She was eight years old. At Mataji's suggestion, an engagement ceremony was performed between Maroni and Chinu. Bholanath was very fond of Maroni and was somewhat overcome at the thought of this early bethrothal. Mataji said, "Do not be sad. It is all for the good of everybody concerned. At the proper time, God willing, Maroni will be married to Chinu."

The festival of twentyone days was rounded off by the performance of *pūjā* in the new temple. The devotees congratulated themselves on the completion of a faultless ceremony. They all felt rather exhausted but extremely happy. The majority of the visitors began to leave but many stayed on since wherever Mataji was, there could not but be people around her.

A few days after the celebrations she went to see one of the devotees. The lady of the house gave Didi a small quantity of a special brand of pulses and some vegetables for Mataji. Didi tied them up in a corner of her outer garment as she had no bag or receptacle with her. At the next house Didi said jokingly to the housewife, "Look, we are out abegging today. What will you give us?" The lady offered some more pulses, rice and vegetables. Mataji visited many houses that day. Bhaiji and Bholanath also had to carry the

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offerings that were thus collected. Ultimately, a separate carriage had to be engaged to transport the food-stuff. All these householders were invited to take *prasāda* at the Ashram that day. *Bhoga* was cooked from the eatables received by begging and a host of people partook of the *prasāda* in great joy.

On the same day, Mataji visited Siddheshwari for a short while and before her departure touched caressingly the image of Kālī and also the *peepal* tree in front of the temple.

In the evening, she sat on the *verandah* of the temple at Ramna Ashram. Only a small group of devotees were sitting around her. At about 11-30 p.m. she got up remarking in a soft voice, "I shall go now." Didi's brother Biren, who was present, was unpleasantly struck by these words. He hurriedly said, "Yes, go and lie down. It is late." As Mataji did not say anything, Biren and the others made obeisance to her and went home. When everybody had left, Mataji asked Didi to fetch Bholanath. Tired out, he had fallen asleep. Didi roused him and gave him Mataji's message. Mataji and Bholanath talked together for some time and then Bholanath came out and started putting on his travelling clothes and shoes. In the meantime, Mataji had sent Jogeshdada to fetch Bhaiji from his home, while she herself sat on the platform within the *pañchavaṭī*. Kulada Charan, Atul, Kamalakanta and other *brahmachārīs* were called and she talked to them for some time. Didi suddenly heard Mataji calling her by name. She ran to the *pañchavaṭī* and found Mataji seated on the platform. Mataji said to her, "Look, fortitude is the prime characteristic of a *sādhaka*. Fortitude is required (of you)." At these words Didi's apprehension increased a thousandfold. Mataji continued, "Do not be agitated. I have left Dacca so many times. But because all of you feel so upset at

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my departure I have to come back again and again. Let me move about according to my *kheyāl*. I cannot do so if you all put obstacles in my path." Mataji went on in this strain for some time asking Didi to set an example for others. But these words fell on temporarily deaf ears. Didi could not envisage a future without Mataji. She was overcome with grief. Mataji then called out to Manoramadidi and sent for Girin Mitra who had come from Calcutta for the celebrations. Nobody except Bholanath and Didi had any idea of Mataji's intention. After some time Suren, who had been working late in the Ashram, came to do *praṇāma* before going home. Mataji said, "Are you going? I am also going out of station tonight." Suren Babu said, "Where are you going? When will you return?" To both questions Mataji answered, "Nothing is certain as yet."

Shashanka Mohan was sent for. He was not surprised to hear of this sudden decision. He had already guessed that Mataji was preparing to leave Dacca again. Whenever Mataji had left Dacca, she had usually said, "I am going for an outing" or "I shall be here when you want me" or similar words. This time she did not say anything about returning. The handful of men and women in the Ashram had by now collected round her. Nobody knew what to say. Bhaiji arrived from home. Mataji said to him, "You will have to come away with us tonight."

After a pause, during which Bhaiji kept silent, she said, "What is it? Won't you be able to do it?"

We do not know what thoughts came to Bhaiji's mind. It was obvious to everyone that Bhaiji was required to take the most crucial decision of his life. He answered with com-

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posure, "I shall go home first and get some money for the journey."

"No, you cannot go home," said Mataji, "Collect whatever amount some of these men over here may have with them".

Bhaiji made no answer to this and quietly walked away by himself towards the temple.

Those present formed a silent group round Mataji. She then sent word to Didima and Dadamashai. Didima came, but Dadamashai, displeased at this sudden decision, did not come. Mataji, as usual, prostrated herself at her mother's feet and then walked out of the new Ashram. She had not allowed anybody to send for a car. She went on foot to the station, accompanied by a small number of people. Didi and her father stayed back at the Ashram at Mataji's request.

Thus, on Thursday, June 2, 1932, Mataji with Bholanath and Bhaiji finally left Dacca.

Mataji sometimes describes herself as a bird on the wing. This comparison is very apt. The free bird soaring in the blue vault of the skies, alights at random and takes shelter at will. Mataji had the *kheyāl* to wander around freely. She now embarked on a course of travel which took her right across the plains of Northern India. Travelling in a haphazard manner, Mataji at last reached Dehra Dun, accompanied by Bholanath and Bhaiji. From the town they came to Raipur, a village in the hills nearby, and took up residence in

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a dilapidated Śiva temple in the vicinity. The ancient temple belonged to a local man of some status. His family fortunes had dwindled and he was no longer able to maintain the temple in good condition. It was in ruins. There were crevices in the walls. The surroundings were overgrown with weeds and choked by tangles of wild shrubberies. Snakes and scorpions abounded and there was no electricity or water.

Bholanath settled down to his own *sādhanā*. Mataji would sit or walk about by herself. They lived like ascetics. Mataji made no arrangements for water or light. Bhaiji would fetch a little water and some wheat flour from the village. This, or some boiled vegetables, sufficed for their food.

The villagers conjectured that Bholanath was a *sannyāsī* who had renounced the world; his wife, unable to stay at home without him, had followed him to this desolate place; and Bhaiji was looked upon as their family servant. Bhaiji's unassuming ways and rough clothes no doubt lent colour to this supposition.

After some time, when the educated among them heard from the local post master, that Bhaiji received many important looking letters with the seal of the Government of India, they revised their opinion about him. Out of curiosity people began to visit them and so learnt a little about Mataji. Mataji already knew some words of Hindi and could talk to the villagers. Soon, they got into the habit of visiting the Śiva temple in order to see her and talk to her.

By and by people from Dehra Dun started trekking along the lonely road to Raipur for a *darśana* of Sri Anandamayi from Bengal.

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The 'Ma' of Dacca became 'Mataji' for everyone.

In a language peculiarly her own, Mataji answered the queries put to her by new-comers. The substance of her exposition was not very different from what she had been saying all along. Some of it may be stated in the following words :

"An eternal relationship exists between God and man", Mataji would say, "but in His Play it is sometimes there and sometimes severed, or rather appears to be severed ; it is not really so, for the relationship is eternal. As such, you may begin from anywhere.

"If you say you have no faith in such things, you should try to establish yourself in the conviction that you have no faith. Where 'no' is, 'yes', is potentially there as well. Who can claim to be beyond negation and affirmation ? To have faith is imperative. The natural impulse to have faith in something, which is deep-rooted in man, develops into faith in God. This is why human birth is such a great boon. It cannot be said that one has no faith. Everyone surely believes in something or other.

"A man's belief is greatly influenced by his environment ; therefore you should choose the company of the holy and the wise. Belief means to believe in one's own Self ; disbelief means to mistake the non-Self for one's Self.

"The light of the world comes and goes, it is unstable. The light that is eternal can never be extinguished. By this light you behold the outer light and everything in the universe ; it is only because it ever shines within you, that you

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can perceive the outer light. Whatever appears to you in the universe is due solely to that great Light within you, and only because the Supreme Knowledge of the essence of things lies hidden in the depths of your being is it possible for you to acquire knowledge of any kind.

"Indeed the whole world is yours, of yourself, your very own—but you perceive it as separate. To know it to be your own gives happiness, but the notion that it is apart from you causes misery. Is it not true that when you are occupied with congenial work you do not feel tired, but if you are required to be busy about uninteresting things then you soon feel weary of the occupation?

"Try to grasp the significance of 'all is His' and you will immediately feel free from all burdens. None will seem alien, all will be your very own, your Self.

"Either melt by Devotion the sense of separateness, or burn it by Knowledge—then you will come to know your Self.

"By virtue of the *Guru's* power, everything becomes possible; therefore seek a *Guru*. Meanwhile, since all names are His Name, all forms His Form, select one of them and keep it with you as your constant companion. At the same time, He is also nameless and formless; for the Supreme it is possible to be everything and yet nothing. So long as you have not found a *Guru*, adhere to that name or form of Him that appeals to you most, and ceaselessly pray that He may reveal himself to you as the *Sadguru*. In very truth, the *Guru* dwells within and unless you discover the inner *Guru*, nothing can be achieved. If you feel no desire to turn to a *Guru*, bind

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yourself by a daily routine of *sādhanā*, as school children do, whose duty it is to follow a fixed time-table.

"When prayer does not spontaneously flow from your heart, ask yourself: 'Why do I find pleasure in the fleeting things of this world?' If you crave for some material substance or feel specially attracted to a person, you should pause and say to yourself, 'Look out, you are being fascinated by the glamour of this!' Yet, is there a place where God is not? Family-life, which is the *āśrama* of the householder, can also take you in His direction, provided it is accepted as such. Lived in this spirit, it helps man to progress towards self-realization.

"Nevertheless, if you hanker after anything such as name, fame, or position, God will bestow it on you, but you will not feel satisfied. The kingdom of God is a whole, and unless you inherit it in its entirety you cannot remain content.

"Apply your reasoning power, your intellect, to the quest for Immortality—all else will follow as a matter of course. It is just like watering the roots of a tree. The tree grows by its own power, throws out branches and leaves, gives forth blossoms and fruits at proper season.

"The supreme duty of man is, therefore, to undertake the quest for his true Being—whether one takes the path of devotion, where the 'I' is lost in the 'Thou' or the path of self-inquiry, in search of the true 'I'—it is He alone who is found in the 'Thou' as well as in the 'I'."

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GLOSSARY

Abhiseka—Ceremonial bathing in water or milk of the emblem of a deity.

Ādyā Śakti—Primordial energy.

Akhaṇḍa japa—The uninterrupted repetition of one of the names of God or of a *mantra* for a fixed period of time. Usually people take turns of one or two hours each. To this day *akhaṇḍa japa* is performed day and night throughout the celebrations of Mataji's birthday.

Ambuvāci—The three days of the month of *Āsāḍh* from the 7th to 9th (June-July), when widows are not allowed to touch fire and have to subsist on raw food.

Annapūrṇa—An aspect of the Divine Mother. *Annapūrṇa* is the giver of food, physical as well as spiritual.

Āsana—(i)—Yogic posture. Every posture corresponds to a particular state of mind.

(ii)—A small mat or carpet used as a seat by each person individually.

Bhairavī—*Sādhika* worshiping *Śiva*.

Bhāva—Spiritual ecstasy, generally emotional in nature. *Bhāvas* usually occur at elevated stages of the path of *bhakti*.

Bhoga—Food offered to a deity.

Cakras—The seven psychological centres in the subtle body.

Celā—Disciple.

Cinnamastā—"Devi, as Uma, Parvati, and Gouri, is the spouse of Śiva. It was as Sati prior to Daksa's sacrifice (Yajña) that the Devi manifested Herself to Śiva in the ten celebrated forms known as the *dasa-mahavidya*.....Kali, Bagala, Cinnamasta, Bhuvaneshwari, Matangini, Shodasi, Dhumavati, Tripurasundari, Tara, and Bhairavi. When, at the Daksayajña She yielded up her life in shame and

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sorrow at the treatment accorded by Her father to Her husband, Śiva took away the body, and, ever bearing it with Him, remained wholly distraught and spent with grief. To save the world from the forces of evil which arose and grew with the withdrawal of His Divine control, Viṣṇu with His discus cut the dead body of Satī which Śiva bore into fifty-one fragments, which fell to earth at the places thereafter known as the fifty-one *maha-pīṭha-sthāna*, where Devī with Her Bhairava is worshipped under various names."

Introduction to Tantra Śāstra, by Sir John Woodroffe; Ganesh & Co. (Madras) Pvt. Ltd. 1960, pp 15-16.

Dādāmaśāi—Grandfather.

Darśana—Sight vision. One speaks of having *darśana* of a saint, sage or deity, which means to be blessed by his sight and presence.

Devī—Goddess.

Didimā—Grandmother.

Dīkṣā—Initiation into the spiritual life, effected through the grace of the *Guru* who represents the Divine. During *dīkṣā* a *mantra* or one of the potent names of God is usually communicated to the disciple, who is asked to repeat it regularly and in a specific manner. This name or *mantra* is the representation of the deity *(Iṣṭa)* of the disciple.

Durgā—An epithet of *Pārvati*, the consort of *Śiva*. The Divine Mother as Fosterer and Protector.

Fakīr—Mohammedan religious mendicant or saint.

Ghī—Clarified butter.

Guru—Spiritual guide and teacher. According to Hindu tradition, the candidate for admission into the spiritual life has to place himself under the guidance of a competent teacher, who usually gives him initiation by *mantra*,

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Hari—God. A name of *Viṣṇu*, the sustainer and preserver of the universe, who is worshipped by the *Vaiṣṇavas*.

Iṣṭa—Literally 'Beloved'. The chosen deity one worships. *Iṣṭa* is the particular aspect of the Divine with which the disciple will have to be in perfect communion before the Supreme Divine Gnosis becomes possible.

Japa—Repetition of a mantra or name of God. The repetition may be for a fixed or indefinite number of times. *Japa* may be vocal, semi-vocal or mental. It may be done either without rhythm or following the natural rhythm of the breath. The counting during *japa* may be done with the help of one's fingers in the prescribed manner or with the help of a rosary.

Kālī—A name of the Divine Mother. Kālī is the destroyer of evil. In Bengal *Kālī-Pūjā* is celebrated during the dark night of the *Divali* Festival in the month of *Kartika* (October-November.)

Kamaṇḍalū—Water vessel made of a pumkin, used by *saṁnyāsīs*.

Kharga—A short broad sword with a curved tip.

Kheyāla—Ordinarily a sudden and unexpected psychic emergence, be it desire, will, attention, memory or knowledge. Mataji, however, has given the word a much wider meaning. She describes as *kheyāla* the incomprehensible acts of the Supreme, as for instance His dividing Himself in creation, etc. In Mataji's case there is no ego to account for her movements, feelings and thoughts. When she uses the word *kheyāla* with reference to her person, it must be understood to denote a spontaneous upsurge of Will, which is divine and therefore free.

Kīrtana—The chanting or singing of the names or glories of God. It may be performed by one person or by group of people to the accompaniment of musical instruments, chiefly cymbals and drums.

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Kriya—Yogic or ritual action.

Lilā—Literally 'play'. Movements and activities of the Supreme Being that are free by nature and not subject to laws. *Vaiṣṇavas* explain the creation as *līlā* of God.

Mahālayā—The day of the new moon preceding the festival of *Durgā Pūjā*.

Mahāstami—One of the main days of *Durgā Pūjā*.

Mahāvidyā—See Cinnamasta.

Mantra—A series of sounds of great potency. It is the sound representation of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Name and form are inseparable. If therefore the name is instinct with life, the form that it represents is found to reveal itself, provided the practice is intensive enough.

Mauna—The practice of silence. It may either mean to abstain from speech; or to abstain from signs, gestures and writing as well as from speech; or the complete stilling of the activities of the mind as well.

Mudrā—Particular pose of the body as a whole or of its parts, representing the expression of a particular *deva śakti* (Higher natural force). Without that pose the particular *śakti* cannot function. The performance of these *mudrās* produces necessary changes in the mind or character. In Mataji's case these *mudrās* came spontaneously.

Nāmajapa—See *japa*.

Nārāyaṇa—A name of *Viṣṇu*.

Nārāyana śilā—A special kind of small stone regarded by Hindus as an emblem of *Nārāyaṇa*.

Ojhā—Exorcist of evil spirits.

Padmāsana—Lotus pose. One of the meditative yogic postures.

Panchamuṇḍi Āsana—A particular type of seat for meditation in a lonely place far removed from human habitation, meant for *tantric* ascetics only.

Panchavaṭī—A grove of five sacred trees, namely, *pīpal*, banyan,

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ashoka, bel, amloki with a platform in the middle. A *panchavaṭī* is considered a congenial place for meditation.

Paṇḍit—One who is learned in Sanskrit and in Hindu Scriptures.

Pīpaltree—The holy figtree. The Lord Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment sitting under a *pipaltree*.

Pīṭhasthāna—One of the 51 places, each rendered sacred by the falling of a part of *Sati's* (Durgā) body, when cut into pieces by *Viṣṇu's* disc.

Praṇāma—Obeisance. An act of surrender, indicating the sense of one's own smallness in the presence of the one to whom obeisance is offered. There are various ways of doing praṇāma ; the most common is to kneel down and touch the ground with one's head.

Prasāda—Food offered to a deity or saint becomes *prasāda* when it has been accepted and blessed. It is then partaken of by the devotees.

Pratimā—Image of a deity.

Pūjā—Ceremonial worship of the Hindus.

Pūjā-room—Prayer room.

Purī—A thin flat cake of wheat flour fried in clarified butter or oil.

Rākhī Pūrṇimā—The full moon day in the month of *Srāvaṇa* (August-September).

Rathayātrā—The car festival of *Jagannatha* Puri.

Roṭi—Bread, usually made of wheat flour.

Sādhaka—One who practises *sādhana*.

Sādhanā—Spiritual practice for the purpose of preparing oneself for Self-realisation.

Sādhikā—Female *sādhaka*.

Sādhu—One who has dedicated his life to spiritual endeavour.

Sākta—Worshipper of *Śakti*, Divine Energy. *Śakti* means power that is eternal aud supreme and of the nature of con-

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sciousness. It is the moving power of Nature and Super Nature. In Hinduism *Śakti* is usually symbolised by a divine woman.

Śakti mantra—The sound representation of the Goddess of the Universe or World Mother.

Samādhi—A state in which the mind is completely concentrated on its object of contemplation (*savikalpa samādhi*) or ceases to function and only Pure Consciousness remains revealing Itself to Itself *(nirvikalpa samādhi)*.

Saṁnyāsi—One who has taken *saṁnyāsa*. The *saṁnyāsī* has to renounce family, caste, social position, possessions, earning a livelihood, rites and ceremonies, etc. and surrenders himself entirely to the Divine.

Sārī—Length of cotton or silk wrapped round body, worn as main garment by Hindu women.

Śāstras—The sacred Hindu Scriptures.

Satcakras—See *cakras*.

Siddhāsana—The perfect pose. One of the meditative yogic postures.

Siddha sthāna—A place of great sanctity where ascetics have performed austerities and attained to Self-realisation.

Siddhi—Realisation, fulfilment. Also an occult power gained by yoga (See also, p. 45, footnote).

Śiṣya—Disciple.

Śiva—Literally 'Good'. A form of the Supreme Deity. The aspect of the Divine Personality that is associated with the dissolution of the universe. The destroyer of that which is unreal. Śiva also stands for the Supreme Being Itself.

Śrāddha—Rites performed for a departed soul.

Stotra—Hymn in praise of God.

Vaiṣṇava—Worshipper of Viṣṇu, the Preserver and Sustainer of the universe.

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Vānaprasthī—According to the Hindu system, human life is divided into four successive stages or *āśramas*, looked at from the viewpoint of the pilgrim on the spiritual path. A *vanaprasthī* belongs to the third stage at which he is expected to relinquish family life and worldly pursuits and dedicate himself to the search of God. It is preceded by the second stage of the married householder *(grihastha)* and the first stage of the celibate student *(brahmachārya)*.

Vāsanti Pūjā—Durgā Pūjā in spring.

Viṣṇu—The aspect of the Divine Personality that is associated with the preservation of the universe.

Yajña—Fire sacrifice.

Yajña agni—Sacrificial fire.

Yajña kuṇḍa—The pit in which the sacrificial fire is kept.

Yantra—Geometrical diagram of different patterns, representing the action and expression of different supernatural forces and intended as a representation of a particular form of the Supreme Divine power. Every force, every *mantra* has its corresponding *yantra*.

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CORRIGENDA

(This list has not been made exhaustive in the hope that it will cause less annoyance to the reader.)

	Page	Line
Consent in place of *parlance*	22	22
lay ,, *laid*	23	10
Sen ,, *Basu*	27	4
a ,, *this*	31	5
Omit *daily* after meal	31	24
himself in place of *her*	33	6
1949 ,, *1959*	41	9
Add *also* after *a tree*	44	21
Omit quotation marks after *day*	49	19
,, ,, ,, after *days*	50	10
Omit *on* after *earlier*	59	17
as much in place of *the subject*	69	11
Add *see* after *to*	69	13
Chaitanya Charitāmrita in place of *Chaitanya Charitakīrtana*	73	Footnote
Add *not* after *would*	78	24
this in place of *his*	95	15
1929 instead of *1931*	118	22
Omit *to* after *Kālī*	123	1
1929 instead of *1931*	124	18
1336 B.S. instead of *1331 B.S.*	173	18

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